



HRA NEWSLETTER

Highfield Residents' Association

Spring 2017

HRA COMMUNITY EVENTS

Frank McKenna and Patrick Coulter write:

In the past six months we've held three very successful events – a performance by Black Fox in All Saints' Church raised £350 for Cruse Bereavement Care, our annual Street Carol Singing in December had a record number of singers and musicians and our Spring Litterpick made a grand job of clearing up our local streets and paths. Thanks to everyone who helped produce these events and who came along to support on the day. We're planning a street celebration for the Great Get-Together in June and also a music evening later in June in aid of Asylum Welcome. In September we'll hold our tenth annual Street Cinema evening. So, lots to look forward to. If you have suggestions for events we'd be delighted to hear from you.

SUMMER PROGRAMME

27th April (Thursday) **Annual General Meeting**
7.30pm. Methodist Church Hall, New High Street

HRA belongs to you so come along to the AGM and:

- hear what we've done in the past year
- discuss plans for the coming year
- raise local issues
- hear how we've spent your subscription
- select officers and committee for 2017 (new committee members welcome)

Around 8.15 pm **Health Services in Oxfordshire**

A presentation on future plans for our health services by a representative from the Oxfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group. Then we'll have questions and discussion followed by refreshments at 9pm.

June 18th (Sunday) **The Great Get-Together** - a day of celebration including a picnic lunch (on the street), street party games, open gardens, afternoon teas, music and an evening social in the Butchers Arms. All Saints' Road will be closed for the day. Further details shortly. [The Great Get-Together is a national event sponsored by the Jo Cox Foundation aiming to get communities to come together to celebrate connections and commonality.]

June 23rd (Friday) 7.30pm. **How it Feels to be Free** – an evening of music and readings in aid of the charity Asylum Welcome in All Saints' Church House. Details to follow.

Mid/late September – **Street Meze and Cinema** on All Saints' Road – details later.

HRA Garden Group *Phil Hunter writes:*

Last year a dozen or so locals got together to start an informal HRA garden group. We met together in one of our gardens for an hour or so from 6 p.m. on the third Thursday of each of the summer months. We swapped ideas, inspiration, and the fruits of experience. It was good fun, so much so that I'm writing to suggest that we reconvene in 2017. It's quite informal - it doesn't matter if you don't have green fingers, if your garden has reverted to its natural state (or never left it), or if you don't know a delphinium from a dandelion. By the way, there are some gardeners that don't recognise the existence of weeds. Anyhow, talking about gardening can be almost as enjoyable as doing the thing itself. If you'd like to take part contact me, Phil Hunter, at hracttee@gmail.com I'll collate an email list and set up the first meeting for Thursday April 20th. Watch out too for the HRA street party event on Sunday June 18th. The plan is to have an "open gardens" session in the afternoon.

It won't be the final Frontier – Mike Ratcliffe writes:

As the frame of 'Beech House' takes shape, the scale of the enterprise becomes clear. We shouldn't doubt that this is big business and the developers of student accommodation have every incentive to build more.



The incentives are clear. Each week huge property deals are announced as student blocks change hands, increasingly involving sovereign wealth funds and other overseas capital funds. The scale of this is immense: Unite Students (who run Dorset House and will run Beech House) have recently bought 3,100 beds from Aston University and disposed of another 4,175 beds in a variety of locations. In total Unite run 49,000 student beds in a portfolio which is valued at £4.3 billion.

The post-war expansion of universities was accompanied by a belief in the residential model of student life. Halls were built (and colleges expanded) to a fairly standard specification. Communal facilities were the norm, encouraging students to mix among disciplines and, eventually, sexes. At the heart of this expansion were government capital grants. Today, however, those capital grants are long gone. Although both universities do build using their own land and money, private companies have taken up the reins. It is easier for them to borrow and do the development. Universities and language schools may make a direct

agreement, promising to secure a level of occupancy. In a prospectus for Beech House, issued before it got planning permission, the economics were set out. Students and summer-lets would bring in £1.4 million. There would be a charge of £0.3 million for managing the block, leaving £1.1 million income. Savills were then looking for offers in excess of £18.6 million to buy Beech House. It is important to note that Frontier have not sold Beech House and are intending to run it themselves, but an investor with access to cheap borrowing would be making a substantial return each year.

A further concern is the way that these blocks are increasing the cost of student accommodation. Just as capital grants to universities have gone, so have student grants. The blocks, they're not halls anymore, are generally built around a 'cluster' model with different numbers of bedrooms grouped around a lounge/diner. Each bedroom is ensuite, but some developments are now coming with deluxe bedrooms, morphing into studios or even 'penthouses'. The porter has become a concierge. The common room becomes a cinema room. The cost of this kind of living exceeds the maximum student loan, and the price will exclude many students.

It won't stop. It does make sense to put students into purpose-built accommodation, but the incentives are there for companies to maximise their income. Hopefully no more five storey blocks for us, but there will be more boldly going up in every university town.

A special Headington Vote

On 4th May we have the County Council elections, but also the referendum on whether the Headington Neighbourhood Plan should be adopted. The plan has been prepared through local consultation and aims to join up parts of strategies that affect us, to set a few policies in place to protect our green spaces and amenities and to keep up the pressure on transport and housing. With a plan in place, it also puts Headington in a better position to deal with the next tiers of local government – very much a live issue in Oxfordshire. Adopting the Plan will help put the priorities of people in Headington on an official basis. Those on the electoral roll will get an extra voting slip on 4th May inviting them to approve the plan. Many of us are hoping for a strong 'Yes' vote.

MR

HRA turns out for OxClean 2017

Hilary Rollin writes:

It may be tempting fate to say this, but the weather has a track record of being kind to us on the first Saturday of March each year for HRA's participation in the OxClean Litterpick. Over 30 people, ages ranging from just a few months, nursery and primary school age, secondary school age and up to 70 plus, wearing suitable gloves and high-vis vests, and armed with litterpicks, turned their attention to gathering up litter. Apart from the omnipresent cigarette ends, sweet wrappers, bus tickets, cans, bottles and take-away cartons, hub caps, and builders' debris, a number of mysterious objects were retrieved; among them a large glass vase and unidentifiable lumps of concrete, rubber and metal pieces, probably one-time car parts.



The Council promptly collected the 40 or so sacks that were our contribution to the 1.76 metric tonnes of recyclable and 2.42 tonnes of landfill waste collected in the OxClean Litterpick. No, we did not put up a poster telling the world what we had done. Suffice it to say a number of people have commented on how litter-free our patch looked afterwards. How long can we keep it that way? Let me know if you would like us to organise our own HRA Mini-Litterpick before the next official one is due.

Incident Book

Unfortunately Highfield has suffered a number of untoward events recently. As ever, the committee is grateful to those of you who report incidents for entry in the Incident Book as it gives us an overview of crime in our area and may help trace a pattern. What sort of issues should you notify us about? Anything from crimes that get reported to the Police (in which case please send us the Crime Reference Number), to broken wing mirrors, speeding cars, late-night noise, vandalism, minor road traffic incidents that may not get reported to the Police, blocked road gutters, missing pets, vegetation spilling over onto pavements, dog fouling, suspicion of drug dealing etc. Just contact HRActtee@gmail.com

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Cold-calling to Solar Panel Owners

You may have heard about, or been approached by, companies offering solar panel servicing and maintenance. This can be worrying if you thought that your solar PV was maintenance-free. Worry no more. I am reliably informed that any such contact is speculative.

It appears that lists of people who own solar PV installations are circulating, and people are being contacted with a range of offers. These fall into three broad categories, and some may be reasonable and others not.

Firstly, employ a battery system as an add-on to an existing solar PV array. As with any cold-calling, approach with extreme caution. Unlike solar PV which was tightly regulated through the MCS scheme, the domestic battery market is essentially unregulated, which leaves it open to more unscrupulous operators. Furthermore, because the solar market has shrunk since the feed-in tariff cuts of early 2016, many renewable energy companies are desperate to sell anything in order to stay afloat.

Existing solar PV owners are also being approached, by for example, Lightsource, a reputable company in the UK solar industry. Lightsource will make a cash offer for your feed-in tariff (a lump sum for the remaining years of FIT), and if you accept, it is a simple task to transfer the FIT to them. You still retain the benefit of the solar generation and not having to purchase electricity from your supplier (*i.e.* you still get lower bills).

The third kind of approach is for solar companies to recommend replacing your existing inverter for one made by SolarEdge. Whereas a conventional system will reduce in performance when part of the array is shaded, with SolarEdge the generation by all panels is optimized. Swapping to SolarEdge inverters is a complex process; not only will the inverter need replacing, but the roof will need accessing and the individual panel optimisers installed at roof level. This is very costly, so you must be sure that the economics of doing this are worth it. In all but the most extreme cases of shading (and panels should not have been installed where there is a lot of shade), this will not be worth the effort. The companies offering these swaps are also pressurising customers, by saying that their existing inverter is out of warranty; this might be true, but inverters are expected to function fully for much longer than the warranty period.

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