

Another busy year for APRA, with a major success!

After much effort, we managed to thwart the Abbey Orchard development proposal. We also continue efforts with SADC to limit the impact of Verulamium Park events and with St Albans School to improve safety of its increasingly large bus operation. We also keep an eye on local planning proposals in our area, the state of roads and pavements as well as refuse collections and recycling.

We work with other resident associations, bilaterally on local issues as well as collectively on matters affecting St Albans as a whole, eg Herts Highways schemes such as Victoria St and EV charging and solar panel policy. We work directly with SADC through our place on the City Neighbourhoods Committee, with council officers on specific matters and local councillors on issues that affect us all.

We welcomed Sally Stevenson to the committee during the year but we lost three valuable committee members, Ian Woodroof to relocation and two stalwarts: Robert Pankhurst and Geoff Dyson to retirement. Thanks are due to all past and present committee members and also to two extraordinary members: Katharine Fletcher and Moragh Ormiston, for their contributions to our notable success with the Abbey Orchard development.

John Hedges
Chair, APRA



Your APRA needs you!

APRA 2025 Committee

John Hedges, Chair, Abbey Mill Lane
Kate Buckley, Vice Chair, College Place
Andrew Yaras, Treasurer, Fishpool St
Jacky Stephen, Secretary, Monastery Close
Malcolm Hull, Abbey View Road
Sally Stevenson, Lower Dagnall St

APRA has been going for 12 years now. But we need to renew as issues and residents change and particularly to reflect the younger demographic.

We need new committee members in order to continue work effectively. The situation is becoming serious, particularly as we wish to improve our website and non-existent social media presence. To join or help please contact us at: membership.apra@gmail.com or M: 07803 798597.

APRA Summer Party Sunday 13 July, from 4:00 to 6:00 pm.

Our annual summer party will be held in the garden of Thatched House, Abbey Mill End. All members are welcome, with friends and neighbours too. Just let us know in advance so we don't run dry!

Abbey Orchard – Success

Residents will recall the University of Hertfordshire's graduation ceremonies last year and the appalling impact on the Abbey Orchard, the Gateway and our neighbourhood generally that resulted. It wasn't the ceremonies held in the Cathedral that residents had a problem with, it was all the ancillary activities that apparently necessitated the construction of large prefabricated buildings on the Abbey Orchard, a public green space. This involved a massive logistics effort with ridiculously large HGVs and industrial lift trucks working on the highway, in and around the Gateway, with almost complete disregard for safety.



The Orchard became a construction site for over 12 weeks, despite only 28 days permitted development being allowed. The unlawful activity of the February 2024 graduation event was particularly dangerous and disruptive to residents. It resulted in damage to the Gateway itself and left the Orchard in a dreadful state for months afterwards.



Despite this, in May 2024 the University submitted a planning application to replicate and legitimise 12 weeks private use of the Orchard (a much loved and used public green space) for future events every year, effectively in perpetuity. An egregious example of institutional overreach. The application included a fanciful economic justification (allegedly, use of the Orchard would result in a net gain to St Albans of several £million each year) but omitted any reference to the damage, dangers and disturbance to residents or how they would be mitigated in future. Indeed, it omitted so many basic mandatory documents (e.g. a construction management plan) while it doubled-down on a logistics operation known to be deeply flawed, that it was shocking that SADC could consider it a valid application.

APRA's objection, with notable contributions from two members, Katharine Fletcher and Moragh Ormiston, along with objections from many residents and the School provided clear planning grounds for refusal along with evidence of the harm caused, particularly to the Grade 1 listed Gateway and to the iconic setting of the Cathedral.

Incredibly, despite the sketchy application and overwhelming evidence of problems without mitigation, SADC planning officers recommended approval. Thankfully, at APRA's insistence, our ward councillors 'called-in' the decision for review by the development control (planning) committee. Its December 2024 meeting was tense. But, after a very helpful contribution from Dawn Gamble (ward councillor) and a lengthy and somewhat tortuous discussion, the application was refused on a nail-bitingly tight 4-3 vote.

Much jubilation and celebration by APRA members in the Verulum Arms rounded off a successful evening and over a year's work by APRA to protect our conservation area.

Since then we can report that: February's graduation event in the Cathedral went well, without use of the Abbey Orchard, and the six months for the University to appeal the decision lapsed on 17 June.

Postscript: Proposed changes to planning regulations, to remove the ability of local councillors to 'call-in' applications for review after officer approval, raise doubts as to whether APRA will be able to achieve similar success against institutional overreach in future.

School Buses – progress stalled?

Residents will be familiar with some of the dangers and problems caused by St Albans School's use of so many large buses in the narrow streets of the Cathedral Quarter, particularly around Romeland Gardens. The School runs a network of 13 routes over a radius of some 25 miles delivering over 500 pupils before 9am and returning them from 4 or 6pm. That is 33 bus movements/day, which probably makes it the busiest 'bus stop' in St Albans.



The problem is that there is no bus stop. Instead, bus drivers stop to load/offload pupils wherever they feel like it, often creating dangerous situations for others. This includes the pupils too, as they often walk, queue and board from the road centre instead of a pavement. Regrettably, road safety considerations are routinely ignored along with road signs and lines (eg. no stopping) as roads, junctions and entrances are blocked and sight lines obscured.



This deplorable situation has steadily worsened over the years while APRA's efforts to engage with the School leadership on bus operations safety (BOS) have been consistently ignored. Last year's Newsletter reported that consequently APRA had withdrawn from routine community group meetings with the School.

The arrival the new Headmaster last September offered an opportunity to reset relations. A one-off BOS meeting in March enabled APRA to update the School on safety issues. At the routine June meeting the School reluctantly agreed to another BOS meeting in September. This should allow APRA and other local RAs to assess whether the School is serious about safety improvements or whether expediency will continue to come first.

Meanwhile, APRA continues, with Edgar Hill (ward councillor), to push SADC for more appropriate and clearly visible road signs and lines around Romeland Gardens.. This is intended to avoid any ambiguity about where one cannot legally stop, park or wait. This should be useful for all, particularly bus drivers. It will also enable better supervision of bus operations by the School and parking enforcement by SADC. APRA's proposals include bus stop markings opposite Welclose St. This is the only potentially suitable site, with a pavement, that allows pupils to load/offload a bus without crossing or walking in a road. Sandy Walkington (county councillor and now a member of the Herts Highways Cabinet Panel) is progressing this with Herts Highways officials. So watch that space.

Verulamium Park

It's well over a year since APRA first wrote to councillors and SADC officials about reducing Ver flooding, risks from sewage and costs of mitigation by reinstating (not raising) the Ver banks in Bell Meadow. In response, we've been told: that reinstatement of the Ver banks was not possible because of the potential for downstream flooding, highly unlikely given the saturated state of Bell Meadow; the flooding is the responsibility of private riparian landowners, not SADC; that the Environment Agency would not allow reinstatement and also that sandbags could not be used – all similarly contentious points.

However, now that the walkway is in place it's evident that the path is still not clear of potentially dangerous flood water, even after an extended dry spell and with sandbags used in an attempt to channel the flood water under a new wetland walkway. So its likely efficacy during the coming winter is certainly questionable. But, at last, our pragmatic suggestion for mitigation seems to be gaining traction, since we've been told: *It may well be that we put in place a means to control how the water gets onto the meadow and at what point along the river. This, in turn, may help reduce the amount of boardwalk (and cost) needed to ensure the path is accessible even when the area is flooded.* We continue to push for improvements from SADC, with Julian Degg (ward councillor).



Meanwhile in Reach 2, between the Causeway and Holywell Hill, some tree removal, pollarding and thinning has taken place to improve natural light to the Ver and to assist with the creation of a wetland. The wetland is intended to improve the park's biodiversity by providing a habitat for a wide range of wildlife, such as wading birds, and different plant species. Apparently it will also help prevent the build-up of stagnant pools of flood water following heavy rain. SADC expected the wetland to be complete by the end of March/beginning of April. Two short but very substantial bridges have appeared over new 0.5m deep, presently dry channels, which with much temporary fencing still in place looks to be another work-in-progress wetland, with some way to go.

On a brighter note, APRA welcomes the resurrection of the Friends of Verulamium Park. They aim to help safeguard its future by balancing public use with its wildlife, natural beauty, and archaeological significance.

Refuse and Recycling

New refuse collection vehicles (RCVs) were delivered last year. They still cannot safely use some narrow streets, as exemplified by more damage to College Place in March. We continue to push SADC to use smaller, greener RCVs.

If you spot any fly-tipping please report it to SADC: Fly-tipping hotline 01727 809019 or via the website.

Roads and pavements

Although some welcome road/pavement improvements have been made, most recently in Fishpool St, we continue to press for better: advance communication with residents, co-ordination of utility works and reinstatement after building works, eg Mount Pleasant.

Please report any problems, such as potholes or pavement trip hazards, by searching for: Herts Highways report a fault.

APRA is a non-aligned voluntary association for local residents, principally in the area around the Abbey roughly enclosed by Holywell Hill, High Street, Verulam Road, Hill Street and the River Ver. This newsletter is distributed to over 600 homes and businesses in that area. Please send comments or queries to membership.apra@gmail.com.