

# OurTown

The Newsletter of Cheltenham Civic Society

Issue 44 • Autumn 2026

YOUR REGULAR UPDATE ON HOW WE ARE WORKING TO KEEP **CHELTENHAM** A GREAT PLACE TO THRIVE



Heritage Open Days: now fully booked, this year's Sherborne Village Bat Walk has been one of the festival's most popular events.

## Heritage Open Days: 30 new events

This year's Heritage Open Days festival marks the 20<sup>th</sup> year that Cheltenham has celebrated its heritage with a programme of events. The festival starts on Friday 11<sup>th</sup> September and finishes on Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> September. It incorporates more than 30 new events which, like all the other events, are free.

The 64-event programme includes a wide variety of open buildings, walks and talks. New events include open days at the Town Hall and the Lido, and a talk

about the Everyman's history with a tour of the Grove Street Education Centre.

The European-wide programme is co-ordinated in the UK by the National Trust. Cheltenham Borough Council supports our local programme with a grant.

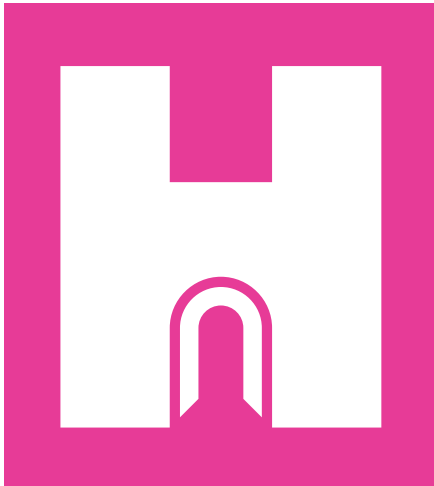
The festival provides rare opportunities to explore the remarkable heritage that makes Cheltenham so special. Access to fascinating buildings, inspiring talks and guided walks are sure to delight every curious visitor. ●



WALK: Imperial Square trees.

### What's in OurTown this time

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BUILDING: Guided tour of All Saints church.



BUILDING: Cheltenham Minster talk and tour.



HISTORICAL MAP LAUNCH: Pittville Pump Room.

## Heritage Open Days festival Friday 11<sup>th</sup> to Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> September

- ▶ All events are free
- ▶ Download the programme from <https://cheltcivicsoc.org/events/heritage-open-days/>
- ▶ Where numbers are limited, book your tickets by emailing: [hods@cheltcivicsoc.org](mailto:hods@cheltcivicsoc.org)



BUILDING: Cheltenham Masonic Hall.



BUILDING: Cheltenham Town Hall.



WALK: The history of Sandford Park.



## Frustrating lack of progress with Cavendish House

**The empty Cavendish House site could become a vibrant new town centre destination, as masters architectural student Cynthia Hartmann's proposal illustrates. But although Max Wilkinson MP helped to unlock the door to the building's owners, Canada Life, progress is still excruciatingly slow.**

While Max put us in direct contact with Canada Life for the first time (after several years of us trying), both Canada Life and Cheltenham Borough Council (CBC) have continued to be unwilling to make public any details of the former's redevelopment proposals they have been in pre-application discussions about for years. (In fact, now more than six years and counting.)

When we spoke to Canada Life in

June, they indicated that they had submitted a further iteration of their redevelopment ideas to CBC about a month beforehand and were still awaiting a response. More than two months have now passed since then and there is no news of any progress. Of course, it's possible that CBC is still yet to respond to Canada Life, but after Max Wilkinson's intervention we would at least expect to see some activity.

Given that CBC now has less than two years before it is absorbed into the new county-wide unitary authority, Gloucestershire Council, we would hope that CBC would be focusing on securing the future of the town centre, if only to create a legacy they could be proud of. But there's no sign of that

and in the meantime, the Prom is being left to decline.

In July, the Echo reported some of the real evidence of that decline. They asked retailers and catering operators near to CavHouse what trade was like. They all reported it had significantly fallen, and Japes – the pizza restaurant opposite CavHouse – put a number on it, saying that with the drop in footfall over the last year their takings had fallen by 40%.

No business can sustain that level of trade loss for very long, so it's probably only a matter of time before we start to see closures. And further dithering and delay by CBC and/or Canada Life will only make it worse. Hopefully, we'll be able to report some positive progress in the winter edition of **OurTown**. ●



CCS members enjoyed a summer party in the garden of Sue and Chris Jenkins. Around £300 was raised for the restoration of Parmoor through donations and a raffle. ●



## Cobbler's Corner rumour quashed

When rumours started circulating on the social media platform, Nextdoor, many people's first thought was to tell CCS that the decorative canopy on Cobbler's Corner was to be removed.

It's good to know that so many people have strong concerns about our town's historic buildings and so many recognise the role the Society plays in protecting the town's heritage.

We contacted CBC's planners, who confirmed that there was no basis for the rumours: they had not received any pre-application or formal proposals, and that the last planning application affecting the site was in 2023.

So we corrected the falsehoods on social media and issued a statement. ●

## Project coordinator appointed for new historical map



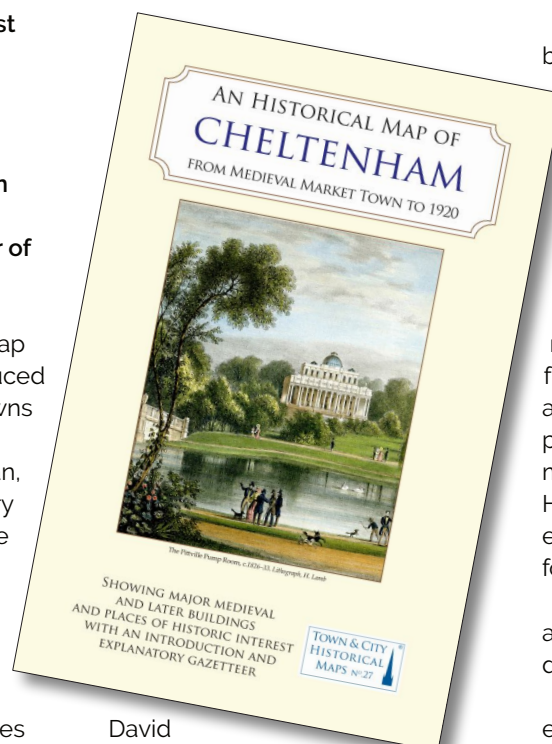
David Morgan (right) – project coordinator for the map – seen here with project board chair, Sarah Staniforth and Adrian Phillips.

A University of Gloucestershire post graduate historian has been appointed by the Civic Society's (CCS's) project board. The board is chaired by Sarah Staniforth – an internationally-renowned expert in heritage conservation – and supported by Adrian Phillips, Chair of the CCS Planning Forum.

It oversees and coordinates the preparation of the new historical map of Cheltenham project being produced in partnership with The Historic Towns Trust (HTT).

David Morgan is a public historian, whose work focuses on the ordinary lives of people in the first half of the twentieth century. He has previously worked as the Interim Operations Manager for the Holst Victorian House and is currently researching Gloucester in the Second World War, funded by Voices Gloucester.

Sarah Staniforth said: "We had a strong field of candidates, but David stood out amongst the applicants." Adrian Phillips added: "We were impressed by David's enthusiasm for the post, his grasp of what the job would involve and his knowledge of Cheltenham's history."



David Morgan has already started work alongside the historians and geographers on the project board. He will assemble the research that will be needed by HTT's cartographer to prepare the map and the historical information which will be featured in a comprehensive gazetteer on the reverse of the map.

David Morgan said: "It's an honour to be able to work on such an important project for the town, shining a light on the hidden aspects of Cheltenham's extensive history."

CCS's volunteer fundraiser, Colin Smith, has also begun to approach large employers and other local organisations to persuade them to sponsor the map. £10,000 has been raised already. But the aim is to raise a further £25,000 to cover all the research and cartography, as well as the cost of printing, distribution and launch of the map. It would also contribute towards HTT's community engagement and educational outreach activities following publication.

The map is expected to be sold for around £12 by all good booksellers or direct from HTT's website.

The project is to be launched at an event to be held at the Pittville Pump Room on 15<sup>th</sup> September as part of Cheltenham's Heritage Open Days.

Though the work might take longer, the project board's aim is to complete the research and production work by summer next year, in time to publish the completed map in autumn 2027 at the Cheltenham Literature Festival. ●



## Doubts about compliance with planning consent

CCS was asked by a GlosLive reporter for comments on the structure being built in front of 131's three Grade II\* listed buildings on the Prom. This was our response.

**CCS is seriously concerned about the permanent structure now being erected outside 131 Promenade. We have examined the structure against the approved drawings and have identified what appear to be a number of significant differences.**

We are also concerned that the application for the Discharge of Conditions for the approved work was only submitted on Monday 17<sup>th</sup> August, some four weeks or more after work started. If confirmed, these would represent serious breaches of the planning permission and listed building consent and raise wider questions about the approach being taken to planning compliance.

We are also concerned that 131's statement talks about materials for the sides of the structure when there is no consent for anything on the sides – removable or not. The structure is to be open-sided.

This is particularly concerning because the structure is being built in precisely the location that Historic England, the Georgian Group, the Council's own Conservation Officer, the Cheltenham Architects' Panel, and Cheltenham Civic Society expressed serious concerns about.

Historic England warned that development in front of the principal elevations of the Grade II\* Regency

villas would harm their significance, describing the proposed frame as 'visually unrefined' and 'utilitarian and unrelenting'. It also warned that approval could set 'a very harmful precedent' for other sensitive historic environments.



The Georgian Group was equally clear, saying the proposals would create 'an unacceptable visual distraction', obscuring original features and 'competing with and dominating' the highly-designated buildings.

The Council's Conservation Officer described the impact on the listed buildings' setting as 'permanent' and 'significant', warning that the development would represent 'an unprecedented form of development' within the curtilages of Grade II\* listed buildings in Cheltenham.

CCS's own objection was made in

the strongest terms. We warned of huge damage to the setting and appearance of three exceptionally fine buildings and argued that the structures would become the dominant feature, obscuring architectural detail and greatly reducing appreciation of their architecture.

We recognise that planning permission has now been granted for a permanent structure, and that decision must be respected. But permission to build something does not amount to permission to build something different, no matter how seemingly minor the changes.

The planning system depends upon approved drawings and conditions being followed. Where a developer departs from what has been approved, the Council must be prepared to act decisively, especially in a location of such exceptional heritage significance.

This is not simply a question of architectural detail. It is a test of whether planning permission and listed building consent mean what they say and whether heritage protection has any real force.

Therefore, CCS has asked the Council to investigate the apparent discrepancies urgently and, if breaches are confirmed, to take appropriate enforcement action. ●

# Gloucestershire's housing land supply

## WILL UNITARY LOCAL GOVERNMENT HELP?

**Gloucestershire's new unitary authority, Gloucestershire Council, stands to inherit a significant housing land supply problem. But will bringing the county's six planning authorities together make the position better or worse?**

The answer is not simply that councils have failed to allocate enough land. The bigger problem is the gap between land that is identified or has planning status and homes that are actually being delivered.

Cheltenham currently has only around 2.7 years' housing land supply against its revised requirement – see the table below. Its five-year trajectory depends heavily on major strategic

sites, including Golden Valley and Elms Park, where delivery is necessarily phased over many years.

Cotswold faces a different but equally difficult problem. Its government-imposed housing requirement has more than doubled to 1,036 homes a year, despite around 80% of the district being within the Cotswolds National Landscape (formerly known as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty or AONB). Its latest evidence indicates that even the emerging Local Plan could start with only 4.7 years' supply.

Even before the economy's problems come into play, three issues stand out:

- ▶ Slow delivery on major strategic sites, where infrastructure, phasing, multiple landowners and the sheer scale of development can mean that permissions do not translate quickly into completions.
- ▶ Viability and market constraints, including infrastructure costs, abnormal site costs, financing, sales rates and the ability of developers to build and sell homes at the anticipated rate.
- ▶ Housing requirements that have increased sharply, particularly in Cotswold, creating a substantial gap between historic delivery rates and the number of homes now expected.

This is where unitary government could either make a significant difference or simply create a larger bureaucracy.

The opportunity is to take a county-wide view of housing delivery. The new Gloucestershire Council should identify the sites that are genuinely capable of delivering homes, tackle infrastructure and viability barriers, address any opportunities from boundary changes and scrutinise delivery trajectories rather than simply counting permissions.

The Council should therefore inherit not just a housing target but a delivery strategy. Its priorities should be unlocking the land that already has planning status, accelerating stalled strategic sites and ensuring that infrastructure keeps pace with development.

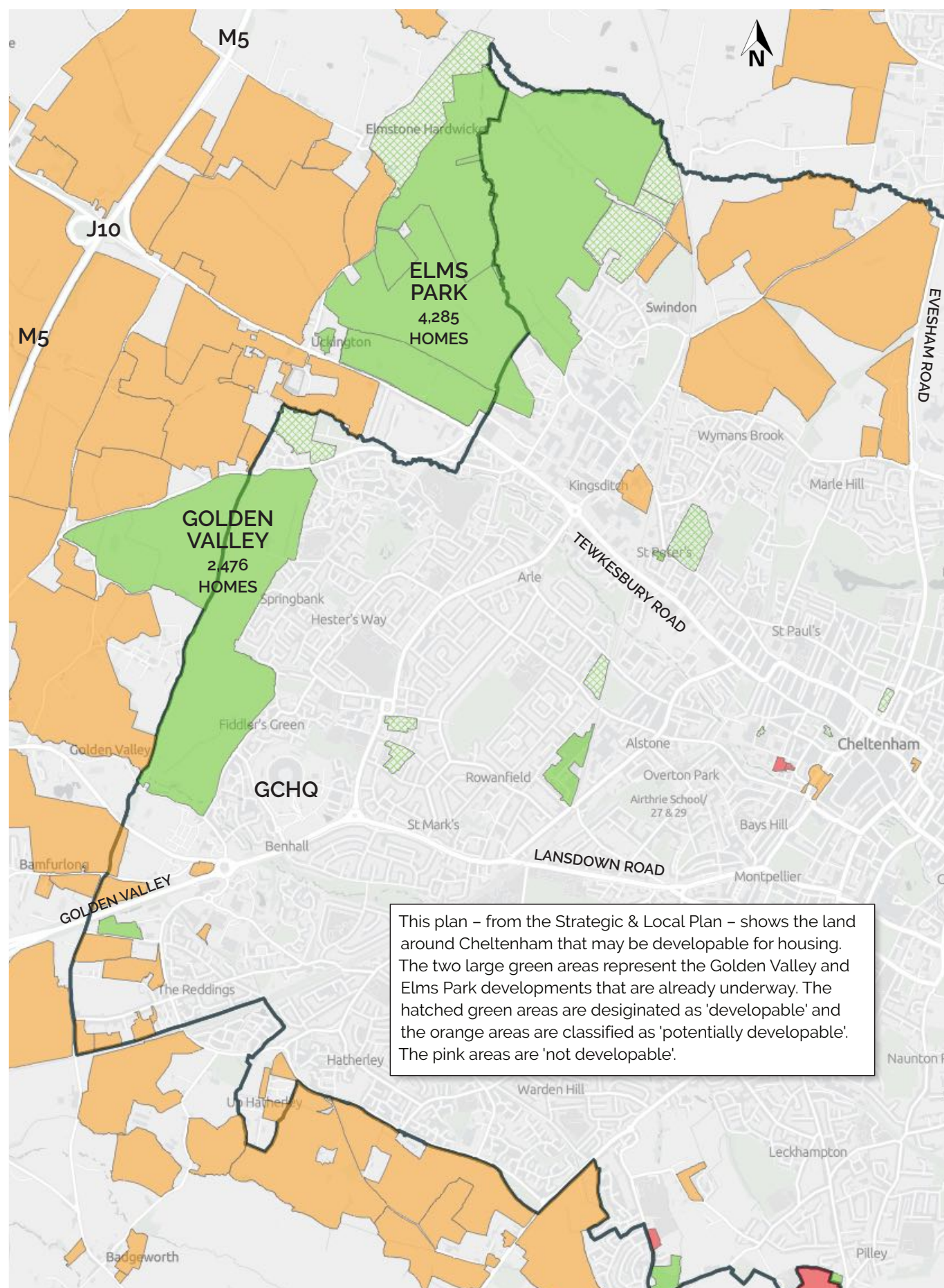
Unitary government will not, by itself, build a single house but if it can remove the institutional barriers that currently separate planning permission from delivery, it could make a real difference. ●

**Andrew Booton, CCS Chair**

| Local Planning Authority | Five-Year Housing Land Supply | Housing Delivery Test |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Cheltenham BC            | 2.52 years                    | 56%                   |
| Cotswold DC              | 1.80 years                    | 68%                   |
| Forest of Dean DC        | 1.93 years                    | 128%                  |
| Gloucester CC            | 4.70 years                    | 134%                  |
| Stroud DC                | 3.20 years                    | 132%                  |
| Tewkesbury BC            | 3.14 years                    | 189%                  |
| Raw Average              | 2.88 years                    | 118%                  |

As this table shows, the picture is highly variable across Gloucestershire, but pooling the figures does not remove the underlying problem. Averaging the existing supplies against each authority's housing requirement produces an indicative county-wide figure of around 2.9 years' supply. This is not an official Gloucestershire figure (a proper calculation would need to be based on the underlying sites, delivery trajectories, requirements and applicable buffers). But it illustrates the scale of the challenge.

The Housing Delivery Test (HDT) provides a different perspective, measuring actual net housing delivery against the required number over a rolling three-year period. Where delivery falls below 95%, an authority must prepare an action plan. If it is below 85%, a 20% buffer is added to its five-year housing land supply calculation. And if it is below 75%, the presumption in favour of sustainable development is triggered – which will significantly weaken the council's ability to resist speculative housing proposals.



## The new NPPF (National Planning Policy Framework) ... ... and what it means for Cheltenham

**The Government has recently published an updated NPPF, England's central rulebook for planning. It sets out national policies for housing, business, transport, environmental sustainability and heritage protection. This major modification of policy introduces both challenges and opportunities for Cheltenham.**

The new framework is more rule-based, reflecting the Government's ambition 'to tackle the acute and entrenched housing crisis in England'.

A clear distinction has been created between plan-making policies and decision-making policies. Plan-making policies guide the preparation of development plans (such as local plans or neighbourhood plans), while decision-making policies form a set of overarching policies to determine development proposals. This may support faster, simpler local plans by removing the need to reiterate national policy and should leave less room for interpretation for both developers and local councils.

However, this raises the question of government power. National decision-making policies now carry 'critical importance' as a material consideration. The NPPF strengthens the national policy position and reduces the scope for local plans to duplicate or depart from national decision-making policies. The statutory starting point remains that applications are determined in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise.

There are some promising changes within the new policies. New design policies give councils a much clearer national policy basis for resisting development that fails to respond positively to its context, character and surroundings, substantially increasing the weight given to compliance with local heritage, building styles and sense of place. This is a stronger, more explicit statement than previous editions of the NPPF offered. The combination of the strengthened design framework and the specific

protection afforded to heritage assets gives the council a potentially stronger policy platform for arguing that inappropriate scale, massing, materials or contextual response are unacceptable.

Among the more ambitious new measures, policy S5 states that new housing developments within a reasonable walking distance (defined as ten minutes or 800m) of a 'well-connected' rail station are to be given a default 'yes' for planning permission, including on Green Belt land, where the equivalent Green Belt policy GB7 now treats such schemes as 'not inappropriate development'.

A station is determined to be well-connected if it lies within the top 80 Travel to Work Areas in England by economic output and is served by four trains per hour overall, or at least two trains per hour in any one direction, during normal weekday daytime schedule.

For Cheltenham itself, the Green Belt element is less significant because Cheltenham Spa station is already within the urban area.

However, the policy's wider emphasis on development and higher densities around well-connected stations could have implications for intensification around the station and other accessible parts of the town. The policy could become a watershed for rural communities across England, where the new policy could materially increase development pressure around qualifying stations, including stations

outside existing settlements and in some Green Belt locations.

The overall message of the new NPPF is certainly pro-development and dead set on increasing housing delivery but also a more nationally prescribed planning system and therefore less local discretion over where and how growth happens.

Cheltenham, with major development plans looming and local government reorganisation adding a further layer of uncertainty, is entering a pivotal period in its planning history. ●

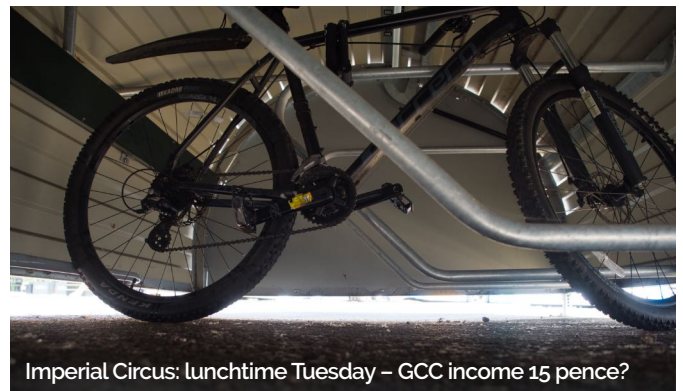
**Casey Douds, Planning student**



University of Liverpool planning student, Casey Douds, has been on placement with CCS and has gained a deeper understanding of how planning impacts communities.



## Why are these bicycle Nissen huts still here?



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and click on the 'Join Us' button.

# CBC's senior planner, Chris Gomm, attended the June meeting of the Society's Planning Forum

## HERE'S AN EXCERPT FROM THE PLANNING FORUM'S MINUTES

### GREEN BELT

**PF:** This question arose from pre-app advice given in respect of the Paddocks development off Swindon Lane but has been given added urgency by the request for a Screening Opinion for 'Land north of Swindon Lane'. We need to understand how hard CBC will fight to protect the Green Belt.

**CG:** The key issue is that Cheltenham does not have a 5-year housing supply, so it is likely that some Green Belt will have to be relinquished. But the rule remains that new housing development is not permitted in the Green Belt other than under special circumstances. The concept of 'Grey Belt' was introduced in the NPPF 18 months ago, which allowed some sites to be recategorised (CG gave the example of former petrol stations in the Green Belt). However, the government's categorisation is very broad, and the planning inspectorate's decisions have tended to support a broad definition. Planning permission is not automatic even in Grey Belt designated areas – any development still needs to meet certain criteria/policy tests. Larger sites are unlikely to be recategorized as Grey Belt. Smaller sites are more vulnerable, as they are based on case law. Planning inspectorate decisions don't consider the cumulative effect. The Strategic & Local Policy (SLP) will define Grey Belt once published. Meanwhile, we rely on the definition in the NPPF.

**PF:** It was suggested that CBC create a guidance note for clarity as an interim measure.

**CG:** Chris Gomm agreed to consider this suggestion, but pointed out that it would not carry the same weight as the SLP.

### SECTION 72 DUTY

**PF:** Recent concerning cases include the Prinbox development and development in the Park. How does CBC interpret its legal duty to 'pay special attention to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of that area?' What more can we do to encourage them to use this power, especially to use it creatively?

**CG:** The duty has statutory weight, and this should be spelled out in full.

**PF:** The duty applies to everyone, not just the planning authority – also highways, developers and homeowners. The planning officers should spell out this duty to applicants. Bath was cited as an example of good practice.

**CG:** It comes down to the conservation officer's decision whether it is of harm or less than substantial harm, but there will inevitably be some subjectivity.

**PF:** How are the team assessing these decisions?

**CG:** The key thing to look at is how it affects its immediate surroundings, and the character of the area, and it can be difficult to articulate this.

**PF:** Often our comments are 'Could do better' – how can officers encourage applicants to do better (as a dialogue rather than an approval or refusal). Perhaps, the conservation area review should be used to reinforce respect for the S72 duty? We also have concerns about members' understanding of the duty – with examples showing how existing Conservation Area assessments/policies have been disregarded or not applied uniformly (e.g. front gardens).

PF will put together a quick note for CG about examples where, in the view of CCS, the S72 duty has not been met.



Chris Gomm, CBC's Head of Planning.

### APPLICATIONS VALIDATION

**PF:** Despite CBC promising a stronger line on this and new internal guidance, we still seem to encounter applications that look as if they should not have been validated – poor quality drawings, absence of D&A statements, etc.

**CG:** It is now better than it was, as we have updated the checklist. But it is still a work in progress. CBC is unusual in not having a validation team – so it is done by case officers as part of their general workload. We did recruit a validation officer, but that staff member has since been seconded to cover maternity leave. ●

# Around Town



The iconic circular stained glass window in the Grade I listed Minster: featured in a Heritage Open Days talk this month.



## Key contacts

|                         |                          |                                                                                |
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NB: Individual points of view expressed by correspondents in OurTown should not be taken as being representative of Cheltenham Civic Society CIO.



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- 2: HODs images – participants
- 3: CavHouse – Cynthia Hartmann;  
party and Cobbler's Corner – Editor
- 4: David Morgan + board – Editor
- 5: 131 – Editor
- 8: Casey Doud – Andrew Booton
- 9: Bike shelters – Editor
- 10: Chris Gomm – Editor
- 11: Minster window – Editor
- 12: St John's school and sign – Editor;  
Circumspice – Mike Rigby

Artwork and layout by the Editor  
Printing arranged by Art Works Design



## A 20mph speed limit would help but maybe not in road crashes like this

One night in early August, a van coming around the inner ring from Bence's took out ten metres of safety railings, a traffic light pole and parts of St John's school's railings and wall.

Was the driver speeding? Almost certainly. (The editor has witnessed many vehicles driving on this stretch at up to 50mph and even more.)

Would a blanket 20mph limit have prevented this crash? Probably not in this case, as some drivers don't respect the existing 30mph limit anyway.

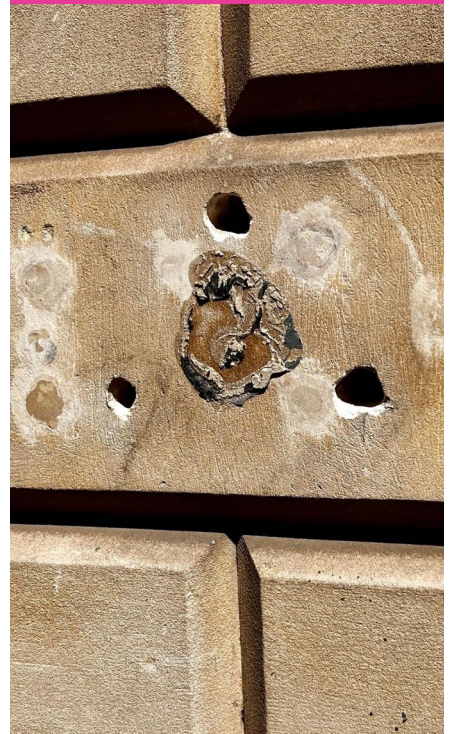
When CCS responded to the County Council's consultation on a proposed blanket 20mph limit across the town centre, we looked at the evidence they

presented and pointed out that they fell short on evidence that could justify such a limit – which is surprising as they could easily have quoted the ample evidence from across the UK that shows that such limits in urban areas do reduce accidents and the hurt they cause.

CCS is all in favour of 20mph limits in residential areas and would also support such a limit on the major through roads if the evidence justified it.

But if such a scheme is to work, it should also address the questions of enforcement and poor road design – like the short stretch of race track past the above school. ●

## Circumspice 23



What is missing from here? How is the world's largest buttercup involved? **Rig**

The answers to this mini quiz\* can be found on the Society's website: [cheltcivicsoc.org/category/news](http://cheltcivicsoc.org/category/news)

\*Unfortunately there are no prizes!



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