

A View from the District (August 2010)

There is an awful lot to report this month, so this is a slightly longer version of my report in the *Girton Parish News*.

As the new Government settles in, it is introducing a number of major changes for local councils. First, our Regional Spatial Strategy is revoked. This is the planning document which (among other things) had identified the number of new dwellings and the amount of Gypsy and Traveller accommodation we need to provide. It was on the basis of this plan (which had to be approved by central Government) that the NIAB 2 land was allocated to housing. Its abolition leaves our planning in some disarray. Second, Councils are to be given significant incentives for backyard development, something Girton residents have clearly expressed their dislike of. It would be helpful to know at what level of financial benefit our village would welcome such infill housing. Thirdly, the Highways Agency, in reaction to the postponement of the A14 Inquiry, has judged that developments like NIAB must be severely limited until the A14 does get improved. This is a worry since much of the vital infrastructure and amenities do not have to be provided until the development reaches a specified number of dwellings; it may produce much smaller developments but with almost none of the facilities they need. Meanwhile the housing pressures will remain.

A long-awaited report on our ICT has been released. It was very disappointing, not tackling many of the issues I would regard as major, and I have raised several concerns which I am told will be addressed. Meanwhile our Planning website has been replaced: after three weeks of *planned* disruption the new version did not work, and, incredibly, there was no contingency plan and the head of ICT was on holiday. We still have no functional service after a further three weeks of (presumably) unplanned disruption, and I have asked to see the specification which went out to tender. The case raises big questions about our procurement.

A 'Community Forum' on NW Cambridge was organised by the three Councils to tackle the issue of transport. We were given a number of excellent presentations on various aspects of the issues: walking, cycling, public transport (which apparently only means buses) and cars. There was then a good session of questions from the floor. The key issue to my mind is the traffic model, and both Councillor Reynolds and I pushed for this to be re-assessed in the light of actual traffic data which we have from Orchard Park and Histon. Another problem is the apparent lack of concern over communication between this site and the NIAB one where most of the facilities are supposed to be located.

On 22 July the Council met, with a very full agenda and some extremely important issues. By far the biggest item was a major Government review of Council Housing finance. Instead of (effectively) taxing our housing income, the new Government is offering to farm out the current national housing debt in exchange for allowing us to keep all the revenue. Our portion of this is estimated at £197M which we would take on at an unknown rate of interest, to the grave harm of a whole generation of local tax payers. The Portfolio Holder put on an amazing performance in his efforts to get our endorsement of a letter which had already been sent but was so muddled and self-contradictory that even members of his own party spoke against it, and the motion fell. It is very unclear what happens now: we may suppose that SCDC might have some more influence with this government than with its predecessor; but it is possible that the arrangement is simply foisted upon us. Whatever happens, the council housing saga is far from over.

Another pretty important motion was the proposal to approve the new Chief Executive, Jean Hunter. It is a good thing that the proposal from the interview panel was unanimous since by this time we were all utterly exhausted and merely nodded the appointment through. I gather though that she wowed the panel, and a firmer hand on SCDC's tiller would be an extremely good thing.

If you would like a fuller monthly report emailed to you please contact me at scdc@de-lacey.org and I shall add you to the list of recipients. If you have any District Council issues you would like to discuss please don't hesitate to ask me.

Douglas de Lacey
South Cambridgeshire District Councillor for Girton