

A View from the District

The University's development in North-West Cambridge is now really taking off, with a number of planning applications for various parts of the scheme being presented to the JDCC. It is difficult to keep fully abreast when one is presented with a stack of papers over a metre high, and a fortnight in which to digest them. I am grateful for opportunities to have personal briefings from the project leader, and a useful stakeholder session presented by the University. The proposals were passed by our JDCC meeting on 20 November and clearing works have already started. The quality of the proposals is very high and the project team very open to suggestions.

On 13 November we teamed up with other agencies to present a half-day seminar at the launch of *Action on Energy*, the ECO and Green Deal programme to provide energy efficiency improvements in the home. Since then of course the whole programme has come under challenge as the government discovers that if it places financial obligations on energy companies they in turn will pass the cost on to customers. This amazing revelation is causing a re-think but the importance of good insulation and other ways of saving energy remains high, and on 22 November Sustainable Girton launched another of its successful energy evenings with talks and displays (and home-made cakes too!). I'm delighted to be associated with Sustainable Girton which is doing a great job in helping us all to save energy and money.

On 28 November Council met. The main item on the agenda was a plan to raise money by entering the housing market. Briefly, the plan is to borrow £7M at low interest rates and lend it to a wholly owned company. This would buy properties and let them out at market rates. The interest we charge the company for the initial loan will equate to its income, so the company makes no profits and pays no tax; the Council pockets the difference in the interest rates. We noted that the only purpose of this is to create an income stream: although the plan has the grandiose name of 'Future Housing' it is not in any way intended or able to address the chronic housing shortage we suffer in South Cambs. The loan will be secured on the houses the company will purchase and we were assured that the maximum risk the Council faces is the loss of the original £7M as the company will carry all other risks. One might have thought that with a £200M loan the government forced us to take on last year, to take on £7M more is risk enough.

We also discussed a motion welcoming the plans to develop a new railway station at Chesterton. After a question from me about protocol, members of the JDCC were advised to abstain so as not to compromise ourselves. This made no difference to the vote which was carried by acclamation. On December 5 the Civic Affairs Committee considered a review of Northstowe's governance. Following consultation with surrounding parishes, various options were suggested. The Leader reported that his colleagues in the affected parishes wished to do nothing at present, but Cllr Kindersley and I objected, citing the experience of Orchard Park, where Impington Parish Council had been distracted from its own constituents while new residents felt disenfranchised. The experience of Cambourne was also cited where a *laissez-faire* attitude had not been to the best interests of the new community. We agreed to allow more consultation and research before we visit the issue again at our next meeting.

I also attended a County project to provide improved cycling facilities, including along Huntingdon Road, and we looked at the developing plan. Residents had been consulted (though with minimal information on options) and a mixed response was reported. We discussed

possibilities and I noted that any changes to the NIAB junction would probably be universally welcomed, but that we need to liaise closely with the developing plans for NWC. There are still problems with the plans and we shall need to ensure that we are not lumbered with a compromise which is in the best interests of nobody.

Central government has made two far-reaching announcements this month. Business rates are to be capped from next year. This is a concern as recent changes in legislation mean that these rates now come to the District Council rather than to central government. (The cynical may link these two facts.) With them came the obligation to repay rate over-charges and I believe that SCDC is currently out-of-pocket as a result of the transfer. So, as often, what was hailed as a great source of income turns out to be a black hole. The second decision is to abandon the plan to toll the A14. If the government can suddenly find the 20% of cost which tolling was to raise one might have hoped that the contribution of local councils (minuscule in relation to the project but crippling for the local taxpayer) would also be abandoned, but that does not appear to be the case. I am raising the issue with our MP.

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