

A View from the District

On 1st May I met the Portfolio Holder (PFH) for Planning and the other South Cambs Group Leaders. This is becoming a regular event, primarily to keep us in touch with the progress of the Local Plan – on which there is still frustratingly little to report, though the PFH thinks that if there had been grounds for rejection the Inspector would have indicated that by now. Meanwhile continued unwelcome speculative applications have at least served to bring us a little closer to the targets we are obliged to meet. The meeting became more animated as the Northstowe PFH tried to put a brave face on that development, but his fiery words provided more smoke than light.

We also discussed the transition from S106 to CIL: Section 106 (of the relevant Act) lets us demand funding from developers to ameliorate the effects of the development: measures from building or enlarging schools to providing extra recreational facilities. This is being phased out in favour of a Community Infrastructure Levy which is a fixed-rate tax on the area of development. But we are not nearly ready to fix the rate, so we are in danger of receiving neither in future. Investigations are continuing.

A week later there was the little issue of the elections. One-third of the District's seats were up. I lost one of my Independents and the Liberal Democrats lost two seats, all to the Conservatives who are in an absolutely unassailable position. The immediate reaction of the Council Leader was to gerrymander the sizes of our committees, apparently to squeeze opposition seats on the Planning Committee. He proposed numbers which, under our complex rules, would allow him to round up his nominal 8.8 seats on Planning to 10, to our disadvantage. We have managed to get him to re-think, but not by much. I proposed splitting the work-load (which is great) between two committees but that did not please him either. The irony is that Planning is one committee from which party politics should be wholly absent.

On 15 May we were offered a workshop on affordable housing and Northstowe. Half of the Northstowe Joint Development Control Committee turned up – as one member put it, in the hope that a chink might shine through the otherwise total news blackout. A great surprise was that our new MP, Heidi Allen, was also present; not saying a lot but clearly listening and picking up our frustration. The presentations told us nothing new, but the Q&A afterwards were much more informative. We noted that to meet the need we should be building 1800 affordable houses per annum: that is more than the total number of houses being built at present. Members also noted that the Northstowe planning team is shrinking at an alarming rate; a claim initially denied by a senior officer who later had to admit its truth. This dissemination of half-truths and innuendo makes it extremely hard for us Members to understand just how the process is being handled by the Councils, but one useful fact which was let slip is that the Government has accepted the need for a revised set of Parameter Plans (which is what our Committee will actually approve or reject), and that these will be put out for consultation. I do not see how this will allow the current timetable of a final decision in July, but we must be grateful that there will be a definitive statement concerning the town square and town park. And, as I said, Heidi was listening carefully and has offered to attend, if she can, our future meetings.

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