

A View from the District

On 18 November the Fringes Joint Development Control Committee (JDCC) approved the two major private housing parcels in NW Cambridge which straddle the boundary between Girton and the City. There were no planning grounds to object to what will be interesting and attractive dwellings, but I did express my deep sadness that the boundary has not been respected, and this will lead to anomalies where neighbours pay different levels of Council tax and have access to very different benefits. I am still pressing for a meeting with the University to discuss governance.

I have been working with a group of residents who would like to see a woodland burial ground established in Girton, and at a recent meeting we began to flesh out a proposal. There are however a number of hurdles to jump.

On 26 November Council met with a very full agenda, of which the major item was a proposal to increase massively our experiment of raising money through the housing company we set up in 2013. We then funded it with £7M, and the proposal before us was that we borrow £100M to fund its expansion. We shall then lend this to the company (Ermine Street Housing, or ESH) at a higher rate of interest thus generating income for the Council even after repaying the loan, while ESH will invest of the property market and lease properties in order to repay us. I confess to being a stranger to the world of high finance but the complex web of financial data did not persuade me that the benefits outweigh the risks. However, the proposal passed comfortably.

We also looked at the future of the two JDCCs, agreeing that the Fringes JDCC should in future encompass all the City Deal projects, even those which do not straddle the boundary; and that the Northstowe JDCC should be wound up, despite objections from some of us that we had been promised that the S106 terms should be ratified by the Committee. A broader-based joint committee may be set up in due course.

The District Council and developers set up a drop-in session on Northstowe 5 December, with some maps of the proposals, pictures of the archaeology done so far and a rather ambitious time-line. It remains the fact that no parcel of land has yet been taken by a builder to develop.

South Cambs DC is hoping to save money by sharing some of our services with our neighbours – waste collection is already shared with the City. On 30 Nov we were offered a briefing led by the Local Government Association. In a muddled presentation we were told of various ways in which Planning might be shared with the City and Huntingdon, and of the range of benefits which would result. I felt impelled to point out that no correlation was made between the level of co-operation and the resultant benefits, and no criteria offered for measuring success or failure. This made the presenter remarkably defensive, and I think the feeling of the Councillors present was that we had been given no useful information – except perhaps that the decision has already been taken to appoint a joint Head of Planning with the City which may rather restrict our choices. Plans will need close monitoring.

Also on 30th we had an extraordinary Council meeting to approve the revisions to our Local Plan. External consultants have agreed with us that the Plan is sound (with a few changes); we can only hope that the Inspectors agree with them. You can comment on the changes (not on the Plan itself, only the modifications) from now till 25 January. Full details at www.scambs.gov.uk/localplanmods-dec2015 or contact me with any questions.

I have had a meeting with the Planning Portfolio Holder to discuss the latest state of pre-application consultations. These cost, and many are not being handled in good time. Lack of staff was blamed, and I was told that specific cases could be expedited. But allowing those who shout loudest to the top of the queue is not to my mind a proper solution. We also looked at Neighbourhood Plans – the Government has allowed communities greater powers under the Localism Bill, and as our own Parish

Plan is now nearly five years old it may be a good idea to re-vamp it as a Neighbourhood Plan.

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