

PLANNING FORUM

Notes of the meeting held on Tuesday, 14 October 2003 at the Town Hall, Royal Leamington Spa at 7.00 p.m.

PRESENT: Councillors Ashford, Mrs Compton, Davis, Gill, Kirton, Shilton, Smith and Windybank

(Councillor Windybank substituted for Councillor Caborn).

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Butler, Davies and Guest.

OFFICERS: John Archer (Head of Planning and Engineering), Philip Clarke (Planning Policy) and Theresa McCool (Members' Services).

Representatives of Town and Parish Councils and Other Organisations

Whitnash Town Council – D R Gough and Councillor Brian Smart

Ramblers Association – Mr S G Wallsgrove

Royal Leamington Spa Chamber of Trade – John Curtis

Warwick Society – Roger Higgins

Whitnash Society/Warwick Gates Residents' Association – Paul Yarwood

Warwick Town Council – Councillor Michael Kinson

Norton Lindsay Parish Council – A R Fowkes and G Bartley

Warwickshire Association of Parish Councils - Alan Moore

Kenilworth Town Council – N J Vincett, T A Martin and G R Illingworth

Royal Leamington Town Spa Town Council – Robert Nash and Councillor Dave Wreford-Bush

Baginton Parish Council – Roger Fawcett

Shrewley Parish Council – Councillor P Wilson

1. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR

Councillor Shilton was appointed as the Chair of the Forum for the ensuing year.

2. APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIR

Councillor Ashford was appointed as the Vice-Chair of the Forum for the ensuing year.

3. NOTES

The notes of the meeting held on Wednesday 19 February 2003 were accepted.

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4. MATTERS ARISING

Item Number 5 - Proposed Playing Fields on Harbury Lane, Bishops Tachbrook Parish Council

Councillor Kirton raised the question of consultation in relation to the allotments. He reported that there had not been any consultation on this matter and that this was not satisfactory. John Archer replied that as this matter was not the subject of planning permission, therefore, it was not part of the procedure to carry out a consultation process.

Mr Yarwood submitted a plan indicating a possible way he saw of improving the access between Warwick Gates and the Harbury Lane playing fields. This would entail a footpath/cycle route being created from Tachbrook Road adjacent to the pedestrian crossing and running along the rear of properties in Ashford Road and Landor Road over the recently undergrounded power cable and linking direct with the proposed playing fields. Mr Archer said he would investigate the practicality of such an approach and would contact Mr Yarwood accordingly

5. REVIEW OF WARWICK DISTRICT LOCAL PLAN

John Archer and Philip Clarke gave a presentation on the Review of Warwick District Local Plan.

Under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, the Council were required to prepare a local plan for the district which must be in general conformity with the Structure Plan produced by Warwickshire County Council. The present local plan was adopted in 1995 and prepared in accordance with the previous Structure Plan (Warwickshire Structure Plan Alterations 1989 - 2001). In August 2001, the County Council had adopted a new Structure Plan covering the period 1996 to 2011. The Council were now required to review its local plan in accordance with this new strategic guidance.

Under legislation currently going through Parliament, local plans would be replaced by "local development documents", and it would be possible for the Council to delay the preparation of the local plan pending the outcome of this legislation. However, this was not considered an appropriate course of action.

The local plan provided the policy framework by which planning decisions were made, but further more provided an opportunity to provide a clear statement of the Council's vision for the development of the district. In this respect there were many important links between the local plan and other strategies to which the Council was committed.

Preparing a local plan was a very resource intensive process, both in terms of staff time and costs. The work had been lengthy and included a number of substantial pieces of work including an urban capacity study, annual housing and employment land monitoring, input to the habitat biodiversity audit/SINC study, and a retail study of the district's town centres. A public consultation to the key issues facing the local plan was also undertaken in 2001.

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In preparing the new plan, the Council had been guided by advice from the Government on its format. A new Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill was presently being considered by Parliament. It made provisions for local plans that were being prepared at the present time under current regulations and recommended a new format for how emerging local plans should be set out. This was a "local development framework friendly" format which importantly would ease the transition to a local development framework in due course.

The previous local plan had shown significant growth with major allocations for new housing and/or employment at Heathcote Home Farm (Warwick Gates), South West Warwick, South Sydenham, Hatton Hospital and at Siskin Drive, Baginton. The new local plan would not face the same development pressures and was seeking to focus development within existing built up areas with a strong focus on the urban areas of the district. The following represented some of the key themes of the local plan and had been grouped under the Government's four main aims of sustainable development from the basis of the core strategy of the local plan - Maintaining high and stable levels of economic growth, effective protection of the environment, prudent use of natural resources, and social progress which recognise the needs of everyone.

Local Authorities were required to carry out environmental appraisals of their development plans. The purpose of which was to ensure that the environmental impacts were taken into account during plan preparation and to help shape policies and ensure they secure the objectives of sustainable development. The sustainability appraisal was a detailed document and a full version of it would be produced when the local plan was placed on deposit for public comment as a background document.

A discussion followed the presentation and the officers were asked about various issues in relation to the Local Plan.

6. AUDIT COMMISSION INSPECTION OF THE PLANNING SERVICE

During 2002, a Best Value Review of the Planning Service was undertaken which covered all aspects of Planning, namely, Policy, Projects and Conservation, Development Control and Building Control. The review was an extensive one of a very major Council Service.

The report of the review was considered by the Change Board and Scrutiny and together with an extensive Improvement Plan, was approved by Executive in December 2002. The Improvement Plan set out a programme of improvements to the Service over a 3 year period. Much of the Action Plan reflected improvements to the service that had been introduced for a period of time, though it provided an effective focus to prioritise work and to introduce new initiatives. As a result of the review, further progress was being made on the introduction of major IT upgrades, additional resources were made available at the time of budget setting to enhance staffing levels in the face of increased work loads and a number of other programmes of service enhancement were under way.

In early 2003, the Audit Commission informed the Council that they wished to undertake a full inspection of the Planning Service. Preparation work took place for this between January and March and the inspection itself took place in the week of 17th to 21st March.

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The process was extremely thorough and intensive, requiring a considerable amount of officer time in preparation and presentation of information following the Interim Challenge meeting in April.

The Inspectorate concluded:

Warwick District's Planning Service provides a fair service to the Public. It has negotiated some high quality developments which have benefited local people. However, the Local Plan which guides future development needs updating and the Council is slow to make decisions. Future prospects are promising because the Council has some good plans to make changes where they are most needed, and some improvements have already taken place

It was very encouraging to see the assessment of “promising prospects for improvement”. The Council is investing well in terms of resources and systems for the future of the planning service and these should continue to maintain progress on the Improvement Plan for the future.

The observations on speed relate both to the Development Control Service and the production of the Local Plan. In relation to Development Control, performance against the 8 week target had been on an increasing trend before the Inspection year of 2002 and had been at top quartile performance with 73% of applications being determined within 8 weeks in 2001. In 2002, the Service was affected by a significant increase in applications. At the same time there were key staff departures and long term sickness within the Development Control Team. This adversely affected performance for the year of the inspection and this is reflected in the comments made on speed. However, this has been wholly a short term difficulty and even though application numbers are now running at highest ever levels, performance for the first 2 quarters for 2003 was back above 70%. It was most unfortunate that a particular set of difficulties that were rapidly overcome coincided with the period of the Inspection.

Outside these areas, the report noted the high levels of public satisfaction that the service achieved and the significant contribution that it made to protecting the environment and improving the quality of the built environment. The Building Control Service was recognised as performing better than comparable Councils in most areas where comparisons can be made.

As well as the general point on speed of service delivery, the report had identified a number of areas for possible improvement. Some of these were primarily related to operational aspects of the Service and it would be necessary to redraft the Improvement Plan to recognise the issues that have been identified. Some of the issues did relate to the Committee process side of the planning process and the Council was advised to consider issues relating to public speaking at Committee, mandatory Planning Committee member training, site visit procedures and improving the “customer friendliness” of Planning Committee meetings.

As already mentioned, many of the improvements were already in hand or implemented. However, the areas suggested for attention would need to be addressed further and courses of action put in place to achieve the improvements required. Many of the improvements that related to providing

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more information to the public and improving their interaction with the service will largely depend upon implementation of the new Planning IT system which was due to be introduced in phases, with the initial stage going live before the end of the calendar year. This was, in itself a major undertaking to achieve at the same time as maintaining increased levels of performance against higher application levels.

Overall, in the light of workloads and temporary performance difficulties, the report is complimentary and supportive to the Planning Service. Improvements can be and should be achieved, as with any area of complex service delivery, and the Inspection Report will provide a good basis for moving forward on these

7. NEXT MEETING

It was noted that the next meeting of the Forum would be held on Thursday, 5 February 2004 at the Town Hall, Royal Leamington Spa at 7.00 p.m.

(The meeting ended at 9.05 p.m.)

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