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CENTRAL AREA COMMUNITY FORUM

Notes of the Forum held on 9 March 2009 at 7.00pm at Tansley Village Hall

PRESENT

Derbyshire Dales District Council

Councillor Peter Hume (in the Chair)

Councillors David Fearn, Steve Flitter, Geoff Stevens and Lewis Rose OBE

David Wheatcroft (Chief Executive), Rob Cogings (Head of Housing Services) and Ros Hession (Overview and Community Engagement Officer)

Derbyshire County Council

Ann Ainsworth (Libraries Operations Manager – West), James Adams (Local Area Liaison Officer – Highways) and Neil Hickman (Assistant Director – Highways Area Management)

Derbyshire Constabulary

Chief Superintendent Peter Lewis and Sergeant Jim Thompson

Police Authority

Carole Brister (Vice Chair)

Derbyshire LINK

Claire Smith (Development Worker – Derbyshire Dales & Amber Valley)

Members of the Public

Mary Eatherden (Resident of Tansley), Paul Gibbons, Jonathan Pilkington (1st Matlock Boys Brigade), John Lowe (Matlock Resident), Kath Potter (Rowsley Parish Council), Pam Hume, A J Mumby (Council Tax Payer), Marion Finch (Tansley Resident), Pat Brewster, Sandra Hill (Tansley Resident), J Peters and Chris Knightley (12 in total)

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

Councillor Peter Hume introduced the officers from the participating authorities and welcomed everyone to the Forum.

LOCAL LIBRARY SERVICES

Ann Ainsworth gave a presentation highlighting the range of services accessible via local libraries.

This included some fascinating facts and figures such as that as a nation we have over 288 million visits to libraries every year and in Derbyshire there was more than 3.4 million visits in 2007 / 2008. Despite the huge growth of Broadband nationally, Derbyshire has the lowest number of households with Broadband access in the East Midlands and consequently libraries are popular for the use of free Broadband internet access, a service which is also provided by some of the larger mobile libraries. Over £2M has been spent in the last year on books (around 150,000 new books).

Ann went on to point out the accessibility of the service, with a presence in every Derbyshire community provided through 45 static libraries and 12 mobile units. Library services can also be accessed 24 hours a day through the County Council website.

Ann went on to outline services such as reference databases and CDs and DVDs to hire. The library service also supported a number of reading groups across the county and operated a Home Library Service for people and/or carers who were unable to leave their homes.

Reading was encouraged from a very early age and Ann outlined the schemes currently running for children and young people and went on to talk about initiatives for adults too.

Questions and comments were then invited and issues raised as follows:

- In response to a question from a member of the public, Ann advised that every visit to the library is counted as the customer walks through the door.
- Councillor Fearn complimented staff at Matlock Library who were very helpful, particularly to those with disabilities. However, he did comment on the poor fabric of the building. Ann advised that the County Council were looking for suitable opportunities for a new building which would have to be available and fit for purpose.
- Kath Potter added her praise of Matlock Library and also the mobile vans, which she thought, provided an excellent service.
- Councillor Hume advised that 'current cost monitors' were also available from libraries and measured how much power your household was consuming. A member of the public added that the monitor device does not need to be plugged in and hence does not cost money to run.

LOCAL ECONOMY AND HOUSING ISSUES

The District Council was stepping up its efforts to fight the economic downturn. Councillor Rose advised that with a series of new measures to help local residents and businesses, the District Council was focussing on helping the Dales make the best of the current economic situation. Affordable housing, safety, clean streets and active, healthy communities will remain priorities in the coming year, based on consultation with residents and businesses carried out by the District Council over the past twelve months.

Councillor Rose announced that the District Council would increase its capital expenditure by an additional £1M and that this should help the local economy during the recession by bringing forward improvements to public conveniences and other public buildings owned by the Council.

Councillor Rose advised that the District Council would normally have been due to consider raising car park charges from 1st April 2009 and that this would have been the first increase in three years, but in view of the current economic situation, car park charges would now be frozen and any increase delayed for a further year. It was felt this would encourage trade, visitors and tourism in the Derbyshire Dales. Local residents would still continue to benefit from free car parking before 11 am and after 4 pm.

Councillor Rose continued that, with effect from April 2009, the District Council would be launching a free debt advice service for residents. The Council would also continue to urge small businesses, in particular, to take the opportunity to tender for District Council services through publications such as "Source Derbyshire" and "How to do business with Derbyshire Dales District Council". Councillor Rose also suggested that businesses should check whether they qualify for rate relief.

Councillor Rose confirmed that the District Council continues to work tirelessly with its partners to lever in funding to help the local economy and provide better services for residents and visitors. The District Council also supports the voluntary sector by making contributions to the Citizens Advice Bureau and Derbyshire Dales Council for Voluntary Services as well as providing grant aid to local community groups.

Rob Cogings followed with a presentation on housing and the economy and advised that local Housing Associations had adopted similar standards for construction as those being applied to the 2012 Olympics. "Local employment projects and local training initiatives will be utilised wherever possible in order to create sustainable communities".

Rob went on to highlight what this commitment meant locally and cited the example of 58 flats under construction at Bakewell Road, Matlock at a cost in the order of £4.5m. Rob gave examples of where local businesses had been used to supply goods and services, with some £0.5m being spent in the local economy as a result of this project alone.

In 2008/9, 91 new homes will have been completed and in 2009/10 the following will be completed:

- Bakewell Road, Matlock – 58 homes
- Elton – 5 Homes
- Brookside Meadows, Ashbourne – 48 homes
- Baslow – 10 homes
- Brailsford – 2 homes

In addition, he was confident that further homes would at least be started in the next financial year and 362 new affordable homes were anticipated by 2010/12.

Compared to other authorities within Derbyshire, the District Council was way ahead in its provision of affordable housing.

In light of the recent credit crunch, there had been increased approaches to the Council for housing advice and the following initiatives were in place to respond to those requests:

- Enhanced housing options
- New debt service
- Mortgage rescue scheme
- Outreach – private tenancy support

- Landlord accreditation
- Rent deposit scheme
- Outreach – older people (Age Concern)

Rob concluded by advising of the current consultation exercise taking place on the Draft Homelessness Strategy 2009-2014 and urged people to comment on the document via the Council's website www.derbyshiredales.gov.uk/housing.

Questions and comments were then invited from the floor and issues were raised as follows:

Housing

- Kath Potter asked if the rumour that she had heard, about Dales Housing merging with a housing association in Northampton, was true? What would be the advantages and disadvantages? Councillor Rose clarified that Dales Housing was a separate entity to the District Council and Rob added that Dales Housing has already merged with a company from Market Harborough called Seven Locks. Councillor Flitter added, in his capacity as the Council's representative on Dales Housing, that no other merger had ever been discussed.
- Mr Mumby sought a definition of 'affordable' as what would be affordable to one would not be to another. He went on to ask for confirmation that Dales Housing and the Council are separate and what the process is to apply for social housing. Rob further clarified that the District Council and Dales housing are separate organisations, and that the Council works with a number of housing associations. Rob explained that the previous system for applying for social housing has been streamlined to a scheme known as 'Home Options' whereby available properties are advertised fortnightly and expressions of interest are invited by post, the Internet, over the phone or in person. Properties will be offered to persons who most meet the criteria.
- Mr Mumby sought clarification between rented premises and shared ownership. Rob explained that a property exceeding £120,000 may be classed as unaffordable – he noted that house prices are falling, although not that significantly. Mr Mumby asked if shared ownership was 50/50 then the property could never be bought outright? Rob advised that some schemes, in larger towns, allowed you to 'staircase up' to buy a larger percentage, but in rural settlements the maximum available for purchase is 80%.
- Mr Mumby asked if it was true that the government had issued instructions that a certain number of houses must be kept available for immigrants. Rob confirmed that no such instructions had been received and it would be unlikely to place asylum seekers in this area as the support networks and services were not in place to accommodate them.
- John Lowe asked if the District Council's capital monies would be used to fund housing. Councillor Rose stressed that housing is the Council's top priority and will 'put its money where its mouth is'.
- In response to a question from Pat Brewster, Rob confirmed that social housing (approximately 3,600 properties in the Dales) is what used to be referred to as council housing.

- Chris Knightley raised the point that if there was no constraint in place to limit the amount a shared ownership house could be sold for, then surely the property would eventually become 'unaffordable'. Rob gave an example of how the shared ownership scheme works and advised that the housing association also set aside some of the monies it receives for re-investing back into the property ie the value can be brought back down through government funding. He added that, as well, the market will dictate value.
- Chris went on to ask if there were any measures in place to prevent a property being bought at a high value and used as a holiday home. Rob advised that there are rules tied to the property and planning constraints may apply.
- A member of the public noted that Rob had mentioned the prospect of more affordable housing in Tansley and asked where this would be. The site where there were already 3 affordable houses was being looked at to extend. It was noted that the houses were not 'affordable' to buy for some locals and that one had had to be converted to rent only. The government encouraged Councils to promote ownership and / or shared ownership, but Rob acknowledged that it did not work for everyone.
- Councillor Flitter re-iterated points previously made, stating that the existing three affordable houses had not been suitable for locals because of the shared ownership factor. He went on to ask Rob how he felt the shared ownership scheme was going to which Rob re-iterated his mixed views and that buyers would need to be earning a certain salary. He cited an example of an affordable housing scheme at Baslow where, contrary, conversion from rent to shared ownership was being considered. The government are introducing new initiatives such as 'rent to ownership' (rent for 3 to 5 years and then buy) and the District Council is also doing more up front work in measuring housing needs.

Local amenities and businesses

- Mary Eatherden asked if consideration was given to services and amenities in the areas when building new houses for example there is no shop in Tansley. Rob advised that the Council and its partners are trying to improve and maintain sustainability. However, settlements cannot be disregarded for affordable housing schemes because of a lack of services. Mary went on to ask if the Council could do anything to promote a shop to which Rob responded that other areas of the Council, such as economic development, were working hard to stimulate the local economy.
- Mr Mumby asked if the Council's assistance to small businesses included a reduction in business rates to which Councillor Rose responded that the Council has no control over business rate levels as the government sets them, but where the Council can exercise a discretion it will. In response to a further comment from Mr Mumby, Councillor Rose confirmed that charity shops attract an 80% mandatory business rate relief and that the Council cannot dictate the nature of businesses if there is no planning permission required for change of use.

FEEDBACK FROM DERBYSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL CONSULTATION EXERCISE (NOVEMBER 2008)

Following on from the County Council's consultation exercise at the November 2008 Forums, James Adams gave feedback on what local people said were their priorities for the future, how these compared to the rest of Derbyshire Dales and Derbyshire as a whole and how this information was being used to plan services for the future.

- Councillor Fearn commented on tourism being rated as low priority by Dales' residents and questioned whether this was because people didn't appreciate how much money tourism brings in to the area. James assured that whilst tourism had not been identified as a top priority, it would still receive attention.
- Paul Gibbons made a comment about museums and their upkeep and the onset of visitor centres.

INTRODUCTION BY CHIEF SUPERINTENDENT LEWIS

Chief Superintendent Lewis, the recently appointed Commander of B Division, introduced himself and outlined his aspirations to build upon the already well established good relationship between the community and the police and emphasised the importance of local policing.

QUESTION TIME

Questions and comments were then invited from the floor to representatives from the participating authorities and issues were raised as follows:

Police Matters

- Mr Mumby asked Chief Superintendent Lewis what he felt was the greatest deterrent to a burglar to which he responded that it may depend on the motivation for committing the crime. Mr Mumby went on to demonstrate a small alarm that emits a high pitch noise and flashing light. Chief Superintendent Lewis applauded anything that deters crime. He went on to point out that this is one of the safest areas nationally, however, we must continue to think about crime prevention and reduction and mentioned initiatives such as property marking.
- Councillor Fearn stated that one of the problems in this area is the 'fear of crime'. He appreciated that the police were 'stretched' and presumed that because the crime rate was relatively low this was reflected in funding and asked how this affected B Division. Chief Superintendent Lewis advised that B Division received a fair slice of the countywide resource pie, but from a national perspective receives significantly less than what it should and this is an area that is being looked into. Both car crime and burglaries are at an all time low. He was aware that raising public confidence was an area for targeting.

Nottingham Road, Tansley

- Chris Knightley raised concerns about motorbikes 'tearing down' Nottingham Road, Tansley in the summer and asked if anything could be done to limit noise and speed. Chief Superintendent Lewis advised that there were powers that could be exercised, but with resources being finite, it was not always possible to

tackle all issues. Sergeant Jim Thompson added that one of the three key issues in this area is speeding on Nottingham Road, Tansley.

- In response to Chris urging that a 'blitz' be carried out one day, Sergeant Thompson advised that extra resources were being drafted in at Matlock Bath at weekends and particular efforts were being made to tackle 'boy racers'.
- Councillor Flitter asked for assurance that the speed on Nottingham Road is monitored and that the sign is replaced. James Adams believed that the vehicle activator signs were moved where they were most needed and was not sure that a sign would be returned to Tansley, but assured that the traffic and safety teams would be working to best target limited resources. Neil Hickman undertook to further look into this matter.

Matlock Town Centre

- Although he wasn't sure who might be responsible, John Lowe asked if there was any chance of the Sainsbury's roundabout starting to look a bit better? After all it had been there about 18 months now. James Adams advised that the roundabout was still in the ownership of Sainsburys and had not yet been adopted by Derbyshire County Council, as the highways authority. David Wheatcroft added that there was work still to be completed and satisfactorily signed off by the highways authority before landscaping could commence.
- John Lowe asked if the Council would consider positioning a work of art on the site to which David Wheatcroft advised that, provided it was the right type of structure and subject to highway and planning regulations, the Council would look sensitively at any proposal. Councillor Stevens added that Matlock Town Council had also been discussing what might be placed on the roundabout.
- Mary Eatherden commented on the state of the area on the right hand side as you approach Matlock from the north (after Sainsbury's roundabout) and asked if the District Council couldn't compulsorily buy the area and convert it into a car park. David Wheatcroft advised that this was not possible, but assured that the Council's planning department had been in touch with the owners to ask them to tidy the area. This had resulted in some work being done, although more was necessary. Mary stressed the importance of this strip of land at this gateway to Matlock.

Planning matters

- Kath Potter queried comments made by a District Council officer on an application for Blockstones which had subsequently been approved by the Peak District National Park Authority. As David Wheatcroft was not familiar with the detail of the application, he undertook to look into this.

Matters in Wirksworth

- Mr Mumby had written to Councillor Irene Ratcliffe at Wirksworth Town Council about Haarlem Mill at Wirksworth (a listed building in poor condition which had recently been featured in the press) and asked if the Council were able to provide any information on the building, which Councillor Rose was not, but undertook to look into the matter.

The Council's budget, Council Tax and Benefits

- In response to a query from Mr Mumby, Councillor Rose explained that Council Tax would rise by 3.6% overall with the District Council's proportion rising by 3.9%. Mr Mumby went on to question why the same principles that had been used last year had not been applied to the level of inflation this year. David Wheatcroft explained that there were many factors affecting how the Council arrived at its budget including the current economic climate, the inability to accurately predict interest rates, energy costs, loss in investment accounts and a poor government grant. Coupled with these factors, the District Council has also had more demands on its services to support residents and businesses in this difficult economic climate.
- In response to Mr Mumby, David Wheatcroft confirmed that the following figures were correct:-
 - 10.3% of registered Council Tax payers receive full benefit and do not pay any Council Tax
 - A further 29.6% pay some Council Tax but not the full amount, because they are in receipt of either partial benefit or a Council Tax discount such as a single person discount
 - 60.1% pay full Council Tax
- He went on to point out that the cost of Council Tax benefit is borne by the government, and not by other Council Tax payers.
- Mr Mumby went on to ask what actions the Council took to check benefit claims. David Wheatcroft advised that the Council has two dedicated enforcement officers along with 8 benefits officers who assess claims. Nationally and locally much work goes on to prevent benefit fraud.
- Mr Mumby commented on the level of contributions made towards the Council's pensions fund to which Councillor Rose volunteered a copy of the Council's budget should he wish to study the detailed figures.
- David Wheatcroft explained that the council receives revenue from three sources 1) government grant 2) Council Tax 3) Fees and Charges.

Waste collection

- Mr Mumby couldn't understand why Derbyshire Dales District Council was the waste collection authority and Derbyshire County Council was the waste disposal authority – why did one authority not carry out both functions? David Wheatcroft explained that the two authorities had different responsibilities and in any case did work in partnership through a joint waste authority.

CONCLUSION AND THANKS

Councillor Hume thanked everyone for their participation.

Meeting closed 9.10 pm