

Monthly SCDC Report by Lynda Harford – November, 2010

Thursday, 02 December came and went without any further news on government funding for the coming year. So the wait continues for another week or so. Meanwhile here is a summary of what I've been up to this month with some snippets of news that have emerged.

- 02/11 *Briefing on Review of the Organisational Change and Redundancy Policy:*
Although the administration is maintaining that no redundancies are envisaged at the present time a review of the terms and conditions has been undertaken and changes were proposed [subsequently endorsed by a vote of full council] that will save the council money in the event that redundancies do have to be made. This was not the happiest of tasks to have to undertake. The changes will detrimentally affect any SCDC member of staff being made redundant but efforts have been made to protect the lowest paid staff.
- 03/11 *Planning Committee Meeting:* One item of local interest: 50 Church Lane, Cottenham for which I obtained a deferment to allow for a site visit prior to the December meeting.
- 04/11 *Scrutiny Committee Meeting:* The task and finish group of which I was a member reported back on their findings in respect of Performance Management. A hard copy of the leaflet that has been produced detailing the recommendations is available.
- 08/11 *Exception Sites Parish Review Meeting:*
Darren Blake, Circle Anglia spoke about the standards that are required for affordable housing and the consequent effects on cost. He spoke too of the other financial challenges facing registered social landlords. Whilst it appears that there may be more flexibility for the future he also emphasised that waiting lists are constantly growing.
Stephen Conrad, Cambridgeshire County Council spoke about the council's record/policy on releasing land. They have provided 5 sites [77 affordable homes] since 1995. There is currently planning consent for a further 28 exception site dwellings. Whilst their policy is not to release land which may have longer term value exception site land is normally sold at very modest values. He reminded the audience that exception sites often create great debate within local communities and there is a challenge in that most are village edge sites which are very visible. Thus any such proposed site where screening is deemed to be necessary must include sufficient land to provide for this.
Keith Miles, Head of Policy – SCDC spoke about the emerging coalition proposals and said that this was very much a work in progress. It is envisaged that much more will be done through local communities and that the government sees parish councils working with social landlords and maybe even forming housing trusts. There would possibly be opportunities for small scale development to be brought forward by parish councils which would be permitted outside of the planning process. But this would need strong electoral support – possibly requiring 75% of all registered electors to vote in favour and could be for market and/or affordable housing with the land to remain in local ownership in perpetuity. It is thought that the delayed Localism Bill [due to be implemented April 2012] will provide for a simplified 'neighbourhood plan process', a relaxation of permitted development rights and greater freedom between classes of development. He said that these changes though would be in addition to current process and it would appear that individual communities could opt to maintain the status quo or use the changes [if and when the changed processes are available].

As far as exception sites are concerned it was agreed during discussion/questions at the end that the first thing you have to do is to find a suitable site [definitely not easy, as Cottenham Parish Council will tell you] and then comes the hardest part: getting local support for the site. SCDC urge all land owners to speak with them for pre-application planning advice [free for affordable housing]. This saves time and makes the process easier.

- 10/11 I spent a very interesting afternoon looking at the new sixth form building at Cottenham Village College in preparation for my support at December's New Communities PfH meeting of their application for an arts grant.
- 11/11 *Leader's Portfolio Meeting:*
It was agreed that the Council be part of the single joint agreement with Cambridgeshire Councils for Voluntary Service for a pilot year from April 2011; To be reviewed in 12 months. He was satisfied that this would not affect the level of support to voluntary and community sector organisations in the district as funded by South Cambridgeshire District Council grant funding.
- 11 *Cabinet Meeting:*
Endorsement of the submission being made to the HCA via the Cambridge Horizon's Board. The investment plan is available for viewing on the website [www.scambs.gov.uk/meetings] as part of the agenda pack for this meeting.
- 16 *Policy & Performance PfH Meeting:*
Reasonable progress is being made to meet the target on community orchards. A number of potential schemes are being followed up. Rampton is one of two parishes being supported by a grant.
- 16 *Finance & Staffing PfH Meeting:*
A report was presented on the effect of budget changes to housing benefit claimants in the district. The PfH stated that residents should be notified as early as possible. As a consequence a letter has been prepared and copies of this have been forwarded to parish councils for information.
- 17 *Planning Enforcement Sub-committee:*
Enforcement action at Smithy Fen will proceed as planned albeit with a 4 month deferment, This will allow investigation to be made into the possibility of the sale of legal, unoccupied plots. The Leader subsequently stated at full council that current policy does not provide for compulsory purchase by the council. Cottenham Parish Council subsequently had a meeting with officers from SCDC on 23.11.10.
- 17 *Housing PfH Meeting:*
Update on HRA reform. The CSR has confirmed that this will go ahead and we await the detail in the delayed Localism Bill. The total amount of national debt has increased since the first consultation phase. A figure of £26b is now being mooted [originally £16b] which may mean an increased opening debt for the council [calculated at £197m at first consultation phase]. In the last few days members have been advised that SCDC's request to transfer 213 of our sheltered scheme equity share properties from the HRA to the General Fund has been granted. This means that we shall be able to retain onward sale proceeds on those properties which we are contractually obliged to buy back. Previously when these properties were re-sold we had to pay up to 75% of the proceeds to the government.
One item of local interest: Transfer of public car parks to parish councils included The Pound, Cottenham. The parish council are still considering this as there are complications with the ownership of the land which would need to be sorted out first.

- 22 *SPEP meeting:* It is great to see Rampton have now joined Cottenham in signing up to this initiative. There are some very practical things that residents can be encouraged to do not just to protect the environment but also to profit themselves from lower heating bills. Insulation is a great example. Thermal imaging cameras are available on loan to demonstrate how much difference good insulation can make.
- 25 *Full Council Meeting:*
Council resolved to adopt the revised Organisational Change & Redundancy Policy. The appointment to the Standards Committee was confirmed of Cllr Alan Brett, Melbourn Parish Council. The appointment is for 4 years and follows the ballot of all parish and community councils in South Cambridgeshire.
- 25 *Northstowe Parish Forum Meeting:*
A meeting where I was left musing at the end that we were engaged in discussion about 2 projects which are non-existent at the present time and nobody knows quite when they will come into being, ie an operational guided busway and Northstowe. I did make some notes which I am happy to share separately although I know that there were representatives from parish councils there who will probably report back to their own councils.
- 29 *Cambridge Local Radio's Guided Busway Debate:*
A very lively meeting during the course of which I thought I observed the poor officer from Cambridgeshire County Council age somewhat.

A couple of reminders:

Village Services & Facilities Study 2010: Cambridgeshire ACRE is updating its Rural Services Survey last carried out in 2007, and is surveying the whole of Cambridgeshire to collect information on the existence of services and facilities within each parish. Surveys were sent out about 22 November and responses are due in by **17 December 2010**.

Grants to the Voluntary & Community Sector 2011/12: Each year, South Cambridgeshire District Council runs a scheme of grants to the voluntary and community sector (VCS). Organisations serving South Cambridgeshire residents can apply for funding contributing to their core costs. Some of these grants are allocated for a 3-year term. In addition, small grants of up to £1,000 are allocated on an annual basis. The closing date for applications is **17 December 2010**. For help with an application form or submitting the supporting documentation, please contact Cambridge Council for Voluntary Service, an organisation funded by SCDC to help you with a range of support for your group. Telephone 01223 464696 or visit their website. For further information, contact your Partnerships Officer. Criteria and guidance notes and the application are downloadable from <http://www.scambs.gov.uk/documents/retrieve.htm>. The document references are 909289 and 909407 respectively.

I hope that you are all better progressed with your Christmas preparations than I am and I take this opportunity to wish you all a very happy Christmas. For the New Year? I wish that we should all have the health, strength, energy and resilience to face the challenges that it will bring and very much look forward to working with you all.

Your councillors are here to help you. Please feel free to contact us with comments, questions, problems or complaints. We hope that we can help but, if we can't, we probably know a [wo]man who can.