

Monthly SCDC Report by Lynda Harford – December, 2010

Happy New Year Everyone! As we step into 2011 we must all be wondering a bit more anxiously than usual what it has in store for us. When I last wrote we were still waiting to hear about funding for the coming year. 13 December finally brought that news and did nothing to dispel the commonly held belief that 13 is not a lucky number. Neither are the numbers that have been communicated in terms of the provisional Local Authority Finance Settlement. In addition to the already planned £1.2million efficiency savings SCDC faces a devastating decrease in funding which would result in ongoing cuts of at least a further £0.7million. The consultation period ends on 17 January and Simon Edwards, as Finance & Staffing Portfolio Holder, agreed at his meeting of 14 December to delegate authority to the Head of Accountancy to set out in clear terms the Council's response to the provisional settlement and the impact it will have on the Council's services.

December was much shorter on meetings than usual but I attended:

Planning Committee: 1 local item for Cottenham - granted in line with pc's recommendation.

Planning PfH Meeting: [1] Draft Service Plan for 2011/12 endorsed; [2] the Planning PfH agreed to respond to the Government consultation on proposals for changes to planning application fees.

New Communities PfH Meeting: [1] Gypsy & Traveller Development Plan Document: PfH noted responses to consultation and agreed various responses and recommendations; [2] Disappointment for Cottenham V C whose application for grant funding was refused.

Finance & Staffing PfH Meeting: [see first paragraph above]

Housing PfH Meeting: [1] The Housing Management Strategy was approved in principle as was [2] The Garage Strategy. [3] 'A Fairer Future for Housing': The PfH noted the draft responses and offered further comment to be incorporated within the final consultation response to be brought back to his meeting on 19 January 2011.

Northstowe PfH Meeting: See separate notes.

The much trumpeted Localism Bill was also published on 13 December. Its central aim is to shift power from central government back into the hands of individuals, communities and councils. Here are just some of the headlines from this very large piece of legislation.

There will be a new power for local people to approve or veto excessive council tax rises through a local referendum. Any local authority [including police and fire authorities and larger parish councils] that sets an increase above a ceiling set by the Secretary of State and approved by the House of Commons will trigger a referendum of all registered electors in their area. It is designed to make local authorities much more transparent and much more accountable to local people. The Coalition Government expects that greater transparency and accountability will help reduce wasteful expenditure. For the first time local people will have the power to decide for themselves if their council tax increase is too high rather than Government deciding through capping action.

The Bill provides a right for local councils, voluntary and community groups, social enterprises and local authority employees to challenge a local authority by expressing an interest in running any service for which they are responsible. The local authority must consider and respond to any such challenge which may then trigger a procurement exercise for that service in which the challengers may participate along with other prospective suppliers. There will now also be the chance for communities to develop a bid and raise the capital to buy a local community asset when it comes on to the open market. This is aimed at saving sites which are important to the community and which will contribute to tackling social need and assist in building up neighbourhood resources.

There will be measures to give people, councillors and councils the power to instigate a local referendum on any local issue. Although these referendums will be non-binding, local authorities and other public authorities will be required to take the outcomes into account in decision making. The idea is to provide a general mechanism for local electors across England to influence local decision making and make their views known. In a move to decentralise power and strengthen local democracy there will be a new General Power of Competence designed to give local authorities confidence to act on behalf of their communities and to act in their own interest to generate efficiencies and savings.

There will be reform of the ever contentious issue of planning. The Bill will remove primary legislation which sets the basis for Regional Strategies. The view is that top down targets did not work effectively and that the target-driven approach to development was undemocratic adding unnecessary bureaucracy to the planning system. To strengthen the role of local communities in planning, the Bill introduces a new requirement for prospective developers to consult local communities before submitting planning applications for very large developments. Three changes are made to the Community Infrastructure Levy which allows local authorities to set charges that developers must contribute to new infrastructure when bringing forward new development. Firstly, the Bill includes provisions to require some of these funds to be passed to the neighbourhoods where the development has taken place. Secondly, it makes clear that funds can be spent on the ongoing as well as initial costs of infrastructure. Lastly, it gives local authorities greater control over setting their fee charging levels. Local councils will have the power to shape their local areas through neighbourhood plans which will enable communities to give full or outline permission for development without the need for planning applications. Communities will be able to take forward development in their area without the need to apply for planning permission although these will be subject to meeting certain safeguards and conditional upon their securing the support of 50 per cent of the community through a referendum. However, greater influence in the planning regime does not mean that there will not still be enforcement. Where people try to flout the system local planning authorities have the ability to take action. Proposals in the Bill will tackle abuses like making deliberately misleading planning applications and running retrospective planning applications and enforcement appeals simultaneously.

In the reform of Social Housing the Coalition Government wants to give back to local authorities the freedom to determine who should qualify to go on their housing waiting list. As social housing is in great demand and priority is given to those most in need, many applicants have no realistic prospect of ever receiving a social home. The current arrangements encourage false expectations and long waiting lists. Local authorities will now be allowed to develop waiting list policies that are appropriate to their local area. There will be changes, too, to the way that councils are required to meet their responsibilities for homelessness and social housing tenure as well as a new national home swap scheme. The most contentious issue for SCDC remains the reform of council housing finance. The final figure is still not settled and should be advised around 21 January.

I apologise to those of you who have already read and digested this and more from the Localism Bill. There will be more to come as the legislation is developed and I will try to keep you updated on SCDC's responses. There are some huge challenges coming our way but opportunities, too. I look forward to supporting your aspirations in terms of both.

Public Consultation – Help to shape SCDC's future direction: You can find information on SCDC's budget and objective setting for 2011 and say whether or not you think the right priorities are being set. Click on the link: [Council Aims & Approaches 2011/12 – Have your say!](#) on the SCDC website homepage before 17.00 on 14 January.

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.