

Robin Page

Disgraceful Planning

OSP 148

When I was elected on to South Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC) for the Haslingfield, Harlton and Eversdens ward on 3.5.2012 I did not realise that I would be walking into an issue in Eversden steeped in animosity and vitriol – the site known as OSP 148. Because of the tangled web of controversy that surrounds it I have obtained its history from a Freedom of Information (FOI) request sent to SCDC. The FOI request was made because I did not feel that I was receiving all the information available either from the SCDC or the Chairman of the Everdens Parish Council and I wanted to make an objective appraisal. I should also point out that although I was elected onto the Council for Haslingfield, I had previously served for over forty years on SCDC for Barton, including many years on the Planning Committee, but resigned in 2006 on a matter of principle. I decided to stand again because of the rising planning pressures being put on South Cambridgeshire and on individual councillors. I was re-elected as an “independent” environmentalist – but also as someone who has always supported social/affordable housing, which includes Council Housing. Many of today’s housing problems were not caused by the simple sale of council houses – but by the **removal of the Discount** under which they were sold. **The price for the resale of the properties should have retained the selling discount linked to the Halifax Index** – sadly a missed opportunity for retaining housing sanity.

The FOI request revealed nearly 1000 documents and I have not yet had time to read them all. It has confirmed that much lobbying was being carried out for the site to be developed despite strong environmental reasons against such development and despite the objections of many completely reasonable members of the village.

Much of the lobbying was conducted by the previous Liberal Democrat District councillor. In my view her lobbying did not come from her politics, I know many good Lib/Dem environmentalists, but from her urban background. FOI has revealed that the present Parish Council Chairman, and the previous Parish Council Chairman were also in regular contact with officers advocating that the site should be built on, with their efforts by-passing me. There are also indications that various meetings took place at which no minutes or notes appeared, for example 17/9/2013, and there were numerous meetings between the Parish Council Chairman, the developers and S.Cambs staff which bypassed me completely and were not reported to me – these were only confirmed by my Freedom of Information request.

Astonishingly in emails, the present Chairman Mr Paul Tebbit refers to opponents of the plan to build on OSP 148 as “Nimby’s” – (eg email to council staff, Acre and two selective members of Eversdens Parish Council 3.12.2013).

By appearing to insult opponents in this way Mr Tebbit demonstrates a complete lack of respect in my view and in my view also he should resign immediately. The facts are that the site is in the Green Belt, it is outside the village envelope and people, including me, and organisation who live nowhere near the site object to its development, including English Heritage and CPRE.

It should also be said that in my view Mr.Tebbit actually owns a brownfield site (an old pig unit) where it is highly likely that planning permission for social/affordable housing could be obtained. He has already converted some old buildings into holiday lets and recently applied for another conversion (which was refused). From his reluctance to develop the brownfield site of his pig unit for social housing, preferring to advocate site OSP148, is Mr Tebbit in fact behaving like a “Nimby”?

The same could be applied to the former Parish Council Chairman Mr.Clive Dalton who actually has land in the village envelope and outside the Green Belt which could be developed for the affordable houses he claims he would like to see built. So does OSP148 also reveal Mr Dalton’s Nimby tendencies?

The reasons for continued refusal on this site are simple.

At the last application there was an officer recommendation that the application should be refused. In my view nothing has materially changed and again refusal ought to be recommended, although at the time of writing I have no information on officer recommendations. Of course over recent years the conservation element of planning has been considerably reduced within SCDC which in my view reduces the credibility of the planning process.

OSP 148 is in the Green Belt and outside the village envelope – it is an important open space – open space is an important element in responsible development and planning. Once a site like OSP 148 is lost, it is lost forever. In the context of nearby listed buildings and the church it is a very significant open space.

As an open space between the two villages it is also important and it is thought likely that there are important historical aspects that need to be properly explored.

It should be said that the site should also have two local protections but the Parish Council failed to have those protections , implemented. The hedge along the roadside of the plot should have been declared “Important Countryside Frontage”, similar to the hedge on the opposite side of the road and it should also have been declared “A Local Green Space”.

In my view the Parish Council, by ignoring both opportunities, acted irresponsibly and also confirmed that they had pre-judged the issue and would make no serious effort to find an alternative site, as revealed in documents dating back to 2007.

Although the Parish Council claims to have looked for alternative sites there is no “paper trail” showing that any serious searches or approaches were actually made. But yet a document produced

for some residents by Bidwells demonstrated quite clearly that other sites could have been considered quite seriously.

An offer has been made by a village resident to buy the site for £52,000. In my opinion it would be irresponsible not to accept the offer and seek to spend it on one of the alternative sites that could be made available. Interestingly my Freedom of Information Request has revealed that in June 2013 the Council had already received an offer of £50,000 for the site – this offer was apparently refused by legal officer Gary Duthie without appearing to refer it to the Planning Committee (email from Gary Duthie to staff 17.6.2013) and without reporting it to me as the local member.

It is interesting to note that objectors to OSP 148 carried out a survey. They collected 53 signatures in Great Eversden against the development, representing 31 households, showing that 33% of the village is strongly opposed to the development of the site and it should be remembered that the site is in Great Eversden and the central issue should involve the community of Great Eversden. They should not be brow beaten by other issues and other agendas; which is a polite way of saying that they should not be bullied.

It should be remembered too that there are few facilities for young families in the village. There is no shop, no school and no regular, convenient bus service; this site is exactly where social or affordable housing should not be. As a result the residents of the proposed houses would have to travel outside the village for simple amenities and would have to have transport. The developed site would therefore automatically have parked cars – again helping to destroy the character of what is now an important open space that could not be retained in any serious way with development.

As I delve through the huge volume of documents gathered under the FOI request – I am sure that other issues will emerge.

I believe that the site OSP 148 should be sold and under no circumstances be developed.

Furthermore the very fact of a re-application has revealed to me some very disturbing forces and practices in what we call our transparent democracy. “Transparent” it most certainly is not.