

REPORT TO FULL COUNCIL

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCILLORS' REPORT



Report Reference C-22-09
Meeting Date 4th July 2022
Agenda Item 6

REPORT OF CLLR TONY DEAN

ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

At the time of writing, the last meeting of the full Committee was in March, but the next one is July 1, so will have occurred by the time of your meeting on 4th. The interim period has seen me busy supporting Jayne Traverse as she carries out the root and branch review of the CEC Planning service - which I requested last November and which was voted through by the Committee. It is a complex task but the draft phase 1 report has now been produced and is doing the rounds of senior manager groups in the Council for final adjustments before full distribution. A press statement is in preparation covering some of the major changes that are taking place, and this will have been released by the time of your meeting. I am confident that Jayne has worked through the problems and complex interconnections (some of which have been dysfunctional) within the department. She has already come up with some quick wins (e.g. temporary extra staff, operational methodology changes, major recruitment campaign) and is proposing some longer term solutions (e.g. a complete overhaul of the customer communications systems, new IT system) which will make the department operate much better in future. The backlog of applications has already begun to reduce.

Cheshire East is in the top five busiest planning authorities by number of applications and this is no minor task, but it is good to see the turn-around progressing.

Another issue for this committee in July are a new draft Waste and Minerals Plan going out for consultation – main issue for Knutsford are the areas designated for possible sand and clay searches, and of course the existing licenses for fracking in our area – I don't believe any fracking will take place here, certainly not in my lifetime. In terms of sand and clay, there are no plans around here before 2030, but it's interesting to see the Knutsford area designated as a future possible area for sand and/or clay prospecting.

The most important item on our agenda is the decision made by officers to review the current Local Plan Strategy (LPS) – I assume they need our Committee's approval to proceed but there is a well-defined national procedure which lays out when these review must be conducted. The reason for our review appears to be changes to national planning rules and guidance, which makes two existing policies in the LPS out of date, and also the approach of HS2 towards Crewe. I will be enquiring if the decision to review on these grounds confines the review to the relevant policies and the Crewe area, or whether it means anything in the current LPS can now be changed – e.g. agreed LPS development sites now being re-visited due to updated and much more rigorous environmental constraints since COP 26 and Biodiversity Net Gain requirements. Watch this space.

NORTHERN PLANNING CTTEE WORK

The June meeting of this committee was cancelled as part of the new system (only one application to be decided, so staff redeployed on to backlog reduction). The July meeting will go ahead and will be a little longer as a result, but it's this sort of operational decision making which will help improve performance.

The main issues coming across my desk in this area are Bark Run (lack of Enforcement action) and the Community Right to Buy request, recently refused at a preliminary hearing, for the Swan Inn at Bucklow Hill. Both issues are live and I am trying hard to get more officer priority on the Bark Run issue, as the Enforcement notice is currently crawling very slowly through the Planning and Legal Departments at Cheshire East. On the Community Right to Buy, I have some sympathy for the people requesting this, but they were very late applying and the building is already in the ownership of a developer – I do not see a good outcome. The main Councillor involved in the issue is Cllr Charlotte Leach, as most of the development site at Bucklow Hill is in her Ward, but it is still of interest to Knutsford people, I believe.