

Town Council Planning Committee: 14th January 2014

Attendance of Michael Jones, Leader of Cheshire East Council

Resident's Issues raised with Councillor Jones

Residents asked a number of excellent questions around the following major issues:

- The 'unfairness' of Alsager being targeted for 50% growth in housing allocation
- The lack of employment in Alsager as a Key Service Centre
- Poor infrastructure already, let alone to underpin such growth
- No serious Infrastructure Plan from Cheshire East Council to address these infrastructural issues
- The 'imposition' of the projected development on White Moss Quarry that did not take account of factual evidence
- The reference to moving sports facilities from the MMU site in the Core Strategy (Para. 15.185) and the removal of the reference to onsite educational provision as a potential use for this site.
- Why had the Local Plan taken so long?
- If it is due to be submitted, as claimed by Councillor Jones, by the end of February what are the numbers for Alsager in terms of housing?
- When challenged, Councillor Jones declared himself to have no financial interests or assets within Cheshire East; nor was he a Mason.
- A request was made by the vice chair of ARAG requesting his attendance at a further meeting " which would be organised by us " at a time and place to allow a further opportunity to those unable to gain access to Tuesday nights important meeting. This would allow further questions to be put to him and his officials, by those deprived of the opportunity to do so on Tuesday, on issues and concerns about what is likely to be a fundamental change to **all** our lives in Alsager. Cllr Jones gave us an assurance that he would be willing to do so, although he later said "so long as the Town Council agreed to its arrangements".

Councillor Jones's Responses

- There is an allocation of land at Radway Green for employment purposes and the objective is to ensure that real jobs in manufacturing are generated and the land not just allocated for Distribution Centres off the M6. He referred to the creation of '3500 jobs' and 'real jobs for young people'. It remains unclear as to how these intentions would be underpinned by any Council strategy to make them a reality.
- He referred to the Sedgefield and Liverpool methods for 'catching up' on the housing backlog over 5 years or 20 years respectively. It is our view that this is a red herring as it has always been clear that the Government advocated the Sedgefield shorter methodology
- He agreed that the housing allocation for Alsager was 'unfair' and referred on more than one occasion to the alleged 100% increase in his own ward as if this were a justification.
- He stated that there were '**serious issues with White Moss Quarry**' and that the Council would be looking closely at these issues. He was also reminded about the decisions that had been taken about WMQ as recently as 2008 when it was argued there was a shortage of aggregate recycling.
- He confirmed that Cheshire East Council will 'fight' the Dunnocksfold Road site appeal
- He stated that '**We would never support 3000 houses**' in Alsager
- When questioned about the infrastructure issues, especially roads and transport, he offered to '**come and work with you**' to address these issues.
- When asked about the delay in producing the Local Plan Councillor Jones blamed the Local Government Review which had led to the creation of Cheshire East out of three previously separate local government bodies.
- **Questioned about the MMU site**, Councillor Jones offered the following contradictory responses. On the one hand, MMU own the site and - oddly and not very convincingly – it was alleged that MMU was responsible for the wording of the Core Strategy document which removes the reference to education on the site and the removal of the sports pitches and facilities to Crewe. On the other hand, **he declared that the pitches and facilities including the Dance Hall 'will stay' and this is 'non-negotiable'**. He stated clearly that '**the Pitches need to stay in their entirety.**'

- **Councillor Jones claimed that a ‘robust’ Local Plan would be submitted to the Department for Communities and Local Government for assessment by the end of February.**
- When questioned about the housing allocation for Alsager contained in this Local Plan he repeatedly refused to respond. He claimed that there were legal reasons why he could not say anything more publicly about this or about White Moss Quarry

Town Councillor Questions

Following the public participation session Council members of the Planning Committee were offered the opportunity to question Councillor Jones

- **Councillor Hough** raised a number of questions with Councillor Jones including reference to the ‘duty to cooperate’ with other Local Authorities. Unfortunately this quickly turned into an aggressively ‘political’ and somewhat incomprehensible wrangle initiated by Councillor Jones on this occasion
- **Councillor Shirley Jones** raised the issue of wastewater and poor performance by United Utilities in the Town. This would be a significant issue for any further development and it is to be noted that even the Cheshire East Council’s Infrastructure Delivery Plan indicates capacity issues in wastewater
- **Councillor Longhurst** pressed Councillor Jones on the MMU issues as his statements in the public session could not be supported from Cheshire East documents that had been published in November. He also referred to the fact that CE officers are justifying acceptance of sites that had been previously rejected because of the ‘benefits to the housing land supply’. This ran counter to the advice from the Inspector’s Report on Sandbach Road North which stated that *‘the lack of a five year supply of housing land does not provide an automatic ‘green light’ to planning permission’*.

Conclusion

It is likely that many residents will have found the meeting to be unsatisfactory and unconvincing. In part, this may be attributed to the inappropriate venue and the crowded room but also because the responses from Councillor Jones were very much those of the ‘politician’. At times he appeared to be aggressive, patronising and unnecessarily confrontational. Residents may have welcomed some of the statements and reassurances that he offered but it remains to be seen whether there is any substance behind the rhetoric. Those who attended will have reached their own conclusions about the credibility of the assurances offered.

There must be a degree of scepticism that there will be a 'robust' Local Plan submitted for assessment by the end of February, given the experiences of this process to date and the quality of the existing documentation.

We can, however, all hope that this is the case and that this 'robust' plan provides an intelligent, reflective and analytical framework for the future of our community.