

An Alsager Neighbourhood Plan

Dear Sir,

In his missive to the Chronicle (*I welcome ARAG's reappearance*, 12th November) Councillor Hough takes the residents association to task as we seem 'to think that the local plan is more important than a neighbourhood plan, misunderstanding the power of a neighbourhood plan.' He goes on to cite one example of a development that has been 'withdrawn' in Sandbach because it was neither a strategic site in the Local Plan nor in the Neighbourhood Plan. This hardly constitutes conclusive evidence of the value of a Neighbourhood Plan for Alsager. Had Councillor Hough actually attended more than a couple of sessions of the Local Plan Hearings he would have heard Stephen Pratt, the Inspector responsible for the Local Plan Examination, declare that even with the adoption of a Local Plan, Cheshire East Council would still be vulnerable to successful appeals from developers if it cannot demonstrate a five-year supply of housing land in the borough as a whole.

Unlike Councillor Hough we seek out *evidence* to justify our views and to ensure that the advice we give to the community is well-founded. On the other hand, Councillor Hough has never been one to let the facts or evidence get in the way of his opinions. We need to make it clear, therefore, that we have sought advice from consultants, experienced planning officers and others involved professionally in the development sector in order to arrive at our standpoint. In other words, we have sought more credible and professional sources than Councillor Hough so that we could properly inform Alsager residents about the benefits or otherwise of Neighbourhood Plans.

We have received consistent advice that Neighbourhood Plans are not legally significant if there is no approved Local Plan in place and, even more importantly perhaps, no demonstrable five-year supply of housing land across the borough. There could be as many as 25 house-building sites with legal approval in Alsager in the next year and it is making false promises to suggest that a Neighbourhood Plan will stop any of these developments. Moreover, we know a number of the professional people who put a lot of unpaid time and effort into the Sandbach Neighbourhood Plan and there is no way that our Town Council can offer comparable expertise.

Let us then look at the track record of those mentioned in Councillor Hough's second letter who have recently attended Strategic Planning Board meetings and who have advocated a Neighbourhood Plan. Alongside Councillor Hough, Councillor Helliwell has publicly declared at a Town Council committee meeting that the Neighbourhood Plan for Alsager is 'my baby'. We leave readers to form their own judgement about such a statement since a Neighbourhood Plan is worth absolutely nothing unless it is 'owned' and supported by the whole community from the outset until the final community referendum on it.

Starting with Councillor Hough, what do we find in terms of 'track record' that might lead residents to have confidence in any Neighbourhood Plan with which he is associated?

- Councillor Hough coordinated the draft Town Strategy that offered up a number of Green Field sites for development, all of which except Fanny's Croft, now also under threat, have been lost to speculative development applications

- He has persistently promoted and sought to increase funding of the Partnership – a mystery to most residents and businesses in the community – and Milton Park Gardens as against other kinds of community support. And now, according to Councillor Hough a Neighbourhood Plan will allow the ‘people who care about Alsager’ to discuss parks and open spaces, recreation sites, cycle and footpaths and town centre developments. Where in this list is there any concern with infrastructure: employment, highways, health and education and so on? These are the issues that are recognised even by Cheshire East Council in the Local Plan debates as the fundamental problems faced by Alsager as a ‘Key Service Centre’.
- He sought to undermine the community-supported MMU project in 2013-2014 which was very much in line with the objectives of a Neighbourhood Plan at a time when Cheshire East Council would not support them and he did so on grounds of his highly personal animosity to ARAG Officers even though many others in the community put significant efforts into this project. As a borough councillor his first question should have been: is there potential benefit in this project for the community I am elected to serve?
- He refused to support in November 2013 the proposal for the Town Council to commission an independent professional impact study of the cumulative developments in Alsager on its infrastructure including highways. Had this been completed then at a fraction of the cost of a Neighbourhood Plan now, how valuable would it have been?
- He demonstrated hostility and lack of interest in putting forward Town Council proposals that might improve the quality of the development planned for Dunnocksfold Road. Moreover he sought to use the consideration of this application at the Southern Planning Board in order to raise money for one of his pet projects – Milton Park Gardens – rather than supporting the residents of this locality most affected by the development. The attempt by residents to raise the issue of ‘protected land’ on Dunnocksfold Road was dismissed by the Planning Committee without discussion.
- He refused, along with the rest of the Town Council, to pursue a request in 2013 to contact both Stoke and Newcastle Authorities to clarify the duty to cooperate with neighbouring authorities although he now claims falsely to have clarified the policy of Alsager as an “area of restraint” in support of their regeneration strategies
- Councillor Hough criticises us for not supporting him and the Town Council by getting behind his ‘pet projects’ and what *he* determines as ‘community spirit’ Given the track record above, is it any wonder that we find it difficult to be positive about him and his colleagues? He does not seem to realise that we would be delighted to have strong, effective and professional representation by the Town Council and at borough level. On the whole, however, we simply reflect the views of many Alsager residents who take an interest in local government.

As for Councillor Helliwell, the less said the better. Her public tantrum was quoted almost accurately in *The Chronicle* (22nd October, 2015) when she attacked both Derek Bould and Derek Longhurst for their attempts to improve plans for the MMU *and* Dunnocksfold sites. As one of the key issues that a Neighbourhood Plan should address is infrastructure, including employment opportunities, Councillor Helliwell revealed that she did not understand either the MMU project as one that would benefit the whole community by bringing a significant number of jobs to the town (minimally 300 were discussed, rising to 500 potentially over five

years). Is she also opposed to the project's proposal to create a community village on the site for the elderly and disabled people of Alsager? And, finally, she did not appear to understand that, as a Councillor at that time, Derek Longhurst was simply trying to do what a Neighbourhood Plan might seek to do – improve the quality of the design and landscaping (the 'quality') of what the developer was proposing for the Dunnocksfold Road site. Apparently, therefore, residents of some parts of the community can expect little from a Neighbourhood Plan led by such advocates while the efforts of others are to be treated with public contempt. In our view the residents of Close Lane-Dunnocksfold- Hassall Road deserve the same support from Town Councillors as do residents of Talke Road – and vice versa.

All in all, therefore, we are not convinced that a Neighbourhood Plan will do much for Alsager that cannot be achieved in other ways at much lower cost to residents. At this point in time, it remains perfectly possible that the Inspector will find that the submitted Local Plan is 'unsound' and, therefore, will not proceed with its examination during 2016. Even if he were to find otherwise following this recent round of Hearings, the published timetable indicates that it will clearly take the whole of the next calendar year before the Local Plan becomes 'adopted' and, therefore, legally influential on decision-making. Until there is greater clarity on the progress or otherwise of the local Plan – with which a Neighbourhood Plan has to conform in terms of strategic policies and sites – there really is little point in undertaking a Neighbourhood Plan, especially in the context outlined above.

On this occasion we have responded to Councillor Hough's letters in detail owing to the fact that they are misleading to Alsager residents. We have no wish to become involved in any further correspondence with him as we deem this to be a complete waste of time. Should he continue to write to *The Chronicle* either about ARAG or us as individuals, we will respond to any queries your readers may have through our websites: alsageraction.org.uk or dereklonghurst.uk.

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