

The Importance of being honest

Dear Sir,

In the two most recent issues of the *Chronicle* (5th November; 12th November) Councillor Derek Hough has delivered two lengthy epistles apparently about the recent hearings conducted by the Inspector responsible for assessing Cheshire East Council's submitted Local Plan. Entitled sequentially 'Alsager update at local plan enquiry' and 'I welcome ARAG's reappearance', these letters have a certain bizarre quality for those of us who attended and contributed to more than one morning session of the Hearings.

Why bizarre? In the first of these missives the self-styled Moses of planning for Alsager makes the following assertion: '*During the debate I was able to clarify the position regarding Alsager being an "area of restraint". In the old Congleton Local Plan review of 2005 Alsager was classed as an area of restraint to help the regeneration of the Potteries*'. He repeats this claim in the second letter. This is, to say the least, very strange as this was an issue that was 'clarified' by Derek Longhurst in debate with the Inspector and Adrian Fisher, the Council's Head of Strategic Planning, at a session prior to any attendance by Councillor Hough. It was agreed by the three parties involved that we would return to the issue in the session on Spatial Distribution nearly a week later which Councillor Hough did attend. At this session it was again Derek Longhurst who reminded the Inspector that this policy issue needed to be clarified and it was Derek Bould and Derek Longhurst who had Mr Fisher recalled to do so in the session.

In other words, Councillor Hough played no part whatsoever in this 'debate'. If Chronicle readers would like independent evidence for this account, please consult the ARAG website (alsageraction.org.uk) where they will find a Post based upon a report from Derek Longhurst that was published prior to Councillor Hough attending any session of the Hearings. This makes it clear who actually raised the policy issue of the "area of restraint" that Councillor Hough claims to have 'clarified'.

The strangeness does not stop there. Based on the first of his letters, Chronicle readers might gain the impression that Councillor Hough robustly raised the issues of cumulative development and the highways infrastructure, including the Level Crossings. The Alsager Highways Study commissioned by Cheshire East Council was a central item on the Agenda for both sessions of the final day of the Hearings. Both of these sessions were attended by Rafe Wakelin and Derek Longhurst who actually raised Alsager's highways issues during the Hearings. This session of direct and immediate relevance to our community was not attended by Councillor Hough or, indeed, any other Alsager councillor so it is once again bizarre that Councillor Hough feels it appropriate to make misleading statements about the part he played in the Local Plan Hearings.

We want to make it clear that our purpose in responding to Councillor Hough's letters is to set the record straight; for us this is not a battle of egos but a matter of principle. Two of the key characteristics required by the Councillors' Code of Practice are 'honesty' and 'integrity'. Many people are disengaged from 'politics' generally, whether local or national, owing to repeated failures by political representatives to follow such values scrupulously.

We do also recognise that there is no point whatever in seeking to debate anything with Councillor Hough since he regularly demonstrates his complete failure to even *listen* to

alternative points-of-view, let alone respect or understand them. His second letter is redolent of this characteristic while the first indulges in self-importance and pretention. This is demonstrated by his representation of the Hearings process. He claims to have been 'invited' by the Inspector to participate in the Hearings having submitted written evidence' - the clear implication is that this evidence was of such a quality to trigger this invitation. In fact, we all also submitted written evidence as did more than 360 other people and the Inspector did not invite delegates; we 'invited' ourselves by registering to contribute to the Hearings sessions.

In addition to his misrepresentations, if there is a wrong end of a stick to be grasped Councillor Hough demonstrates a consistent ability to do so. Both his first letter and his contribution to the debate indicate that he clearly did not understand the issue of employment land. It is sometimes necessary to draw upon data as evidence (not, we agree, Councillor Hough's strong point) in such contexts. We were pointing to the mismatch between the Council's decision to locate a significantly higher percentage of housing land in the south of the borough while recognising that employers and jobs are attracted to locations in the northern settlements where the Council has allocated a much higher level of employment land. For Councillor Hough to argue, therefore, that Alsager does not need more employment land simply misses the point. At the Hearing the mismatch between north and south Cheshire East was emphasised by Derek Bould who put it very simply: '*They get the jobs but not the houses and we get the houses but not the jobs.*'

Finally, in his second letter, largely a diatribe about ARAG, Councillor Hough urges us to show some 'community spirit' by supporting his 'pet projects' such as the Partnership and Milton Park Gardens. Once again, Councillor Hough thinks that he – and only he – defines such community spirit. As individuals and as a group we would define community spirit differently from Councillor Hough's vanity projects. For us, it is more about helping vulnerable people, for instance, and working to improve healthcare services, as we have done, for residents in our town. We can also claim, as 'volunteers', to have regularly demonstrated community spirit by representing it in planning matters for the last three years and more. Councillors Hough, Fletcher and now Deakin receive payment and expenses for representing our community so it is perfectly legitimate to ask questions when they fail to do so and are absent from important Hearings on the Local Plan. Since we have made the effort as volunteers, it is also not unreasonable to suggest that members of the Town Council's Planning Committee might also demonstrate some interest in representing the community they are elected to serve?

We will take up the issue of the Neighbourhood Plan raised by Councillor Hough in a separate letter to explain our position to those readers who have an interest in this matter.

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