

THE LOCAL ACTION TEAM HAS BEEN WOUND UP!

As reported elsewhere in this magazine the Local Action Team (LAT) having fulfilled its remit voted itself out of existence. The following is a report on the work we did. The words and any views expressed are mine and cannot be attributed to anyone else.

I represented the parish council on the Wealden and District Association of Local Councils that chose me to represent them on the Sussex Association of Local Councils (SALC) and they in turn made me a member of the Joint Liaison Committee of the Sussex and Surrey Association of Local Councils. Thus I found myself at meeting in Ardingly where SALC and Action in Rural Sussex (AIRS) were holding their AGMS. I was spouting my usual complaints about no one taking notice of Parish Plans to the person sat next to me who turned out to be Mark McTaggart of AIRS and he told me about a research project he was involved in under the auspices of Carnegie UK. The partners in the project were AIRS, Wealden District Council (WDC) and Wealden Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) and they were looking to work with five parishes to assess and explore linkages between Parish Plans and the strategies of the individual partnership members. I was asked if I would like to involve our parish in the process.

Mark made a presentation about the project at a meeting of the parish council. The idea behind the project was that selected parish councils would generate a set of objectives to be achieved on 3 to 5 aims. This did not fit easily with our Parish Plan that “set out a sustainable approach to development in the parish without destroying its social and economic structure and its sensitive ecosystem” (see preface to 2008 Parish Plan). The parish council agreed to take part in the project by setting up a committee “at arms length” to work in partnership with the community, statutory and other authorities to ensure the planned new developments in East Hoathly could be seamlessly integrated. As I had initiated the idea and was the author of the Parish Plan the parish council mandated me to set up the committee and act as the link to them.

Our Parish Plan is almost a declaration of war on one of the partners in the project, WDC, on account of the flawed, insidious Non-Statutory Local Plan they forced on us thereby denying us the right to express our views at a Public Inquiry and using it as an instrument to frustrate us gaining contributions from the developers of the new housing towards the cost of a new community centre. (*I also believe that the “ransom strip” that WDC owned unbeknown to us and sold to the developer for £1.14 million might also have featured here.*) It is to WDC’s credit that they not only sanctioned our participation but also agreed to one of their senior officers joining the committee that was named the Local Action Team.

After advertising for people to become members a team of two groups was set up: an Advisory Group comprising Wealden District Councillor Barby Dashwood-Hall, WDC Public Health Development Manager Dr. Jeremy Leach, Mark McTaggart Team Manager AIRS and myself. The Working Group was made up of Peter Brooke, Fred Dinan, Fiona Dobbs, Chris Graham, William Greaves, Phil Hodgins, Alan Jupp, and me.

An inaugural meeting to formally set up the Team, appoint officers and decide terms of reference was held 25 April 2008. Time was also spent brainstorming and doing a Swot analysis to decide up on series of special meetings. The Team also resolved to produce a Directory of all the facilities available in the parish to be given to all the incoming households.

It was now apparent that due to the financial situation the building of the new homes would cease or be severely curtailed. This tended to pull out the rug from under the Team’s feet but it was decided to continue although much of the imperative had gone.

The first meeting was with Graham Credland from the NHS Primary Care Trust and Dr David Wright from the East Hoathly Surgery also attended. We had hoped to discuss Dentist Provision and Maternity Care but the breadth of these topics went beyond the remit of our Team and we concentrated on the provision of a new doctors surgery in East Hoathly. This was productive meeting. The availability of the site on the Linden Homes development is triggered by sale of the 10th house on that development and the Team was told recently that negotiations to purchase the site are taking place currently.

The next meeting 31 July was with Chief Inspector Neil Honnor of Sussex Police and the Team was reinforced with parishioners and former “village bobbies” David Farmer and John Tarry. The parish suffers from minor vandalism and speeding traffic but crime is not a big issue I thought, so I was surprised at the divergence of views expressed during the debate. The chief inspector stressed the amount of effort put in getting closer to communities while some of the Team (myself included) felt that policing was becoming more remote from the community.

The meeting where I learned most was held in September when Jan Murphy, Head of Youth Services, East Sussex County Council came to meet us. Our “youth advisors” Chris Graham and William Greaves along with Hattie Mills and Ted Mullins attended this meeting and did the parish proud with their intelligence, demeanour and articulation. Three particularly needed improvements were identified – an improved bus service to Lewes, better facilities for females to take part in sport and a space/shelter dedicated for use by the youth. The planning approvals to develop the two housing sites in East Hoathly stipulate contributions that the developers must make to the parish council for providing, improving and maintaining the play space facilities at the London Road Recreation Area in the sums of approximately £57,000 and £22,000. The Team hopes that some of this money will go towards improving the changing, shower and toilet facilities for ladies in the sports pavilion. The parish council accepted the Team’s recommendation to provide a “youth shelter” for which grants are available.

In October the Team met officials of East Sussex County Council, Colin Clerk, Head of Service for Transport Strategy and Road Safety and Jon Wheeler, Team Manger Transport Strategy. The only good news was that the 40mph limit on the A22 will be reduced to 30mph and that ESCC is prepared to let the parish council have a say in how they spend the £131000 they will receive from the developers as a planning contributions towards sustainable transport needs. (The team suggested improving the footpaths on the A22 and a cycle track.) We are unlikely to see reductions in speed or weight limits on rural lanes and the Halland By-Pass will not happen.

Our next meeting in November was to discuss Affordable Housing with officials from WDC, Bob Taylor and Hayley Frankham who gave an excellent PowerPoint presentation that explained the background and what would happen in East Hoathly. The officials answered the Team’s concerns about problem families being dumped in the village and the Housing Associations increasing their stocks by stealth. One of the good things to come out of this meeting is that recent adverts for tenants on the South St. development has stipulated that preference will be given to applicants with a local connection.

The final meeting that took place earlier this month on Refuse and Recycling is reported on elsewhere in this magazine. At this meeting the Team ratified the contents of the welcoming Directory referred to earlier that will be distributed when the funds for having it printed have been raised.

What has the Team achieved given that the effects of the financial cutback diminished the problem of absorbing so many new households in to our community in a very tight time frame? The only tangible gain is the production of the Directory. But there can be no doubt that the project has allowed us to make known and discuss our concerns and aspirations in a forum that would never otherwise have been accessible to a small rural community and we have established an important network that I suspect will serve the parish well in the future. My heartfelt thanks go to all the people who contributed.

Mervyn Barnes
14 April 2009

NOTE: The Team hopes the parish council will put the directory on its web site so you will be able to download a copy.