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The Leamington Society Newsletter

May 2014

Chairman's Notes

Back to the Drawing board at Riverside House?

Our District Council published its Draft Local Plan just over a month ago, but already it has been overtaken by events, by the publication on 29th May of the latest figures from the ONS (Office of National Statistics).

For Warwick District, the ONS now projects a growth in population 29% less than that assumed by WDC for the Draft Plan.

The requirement for a local plan is to provide for "Objectively assessed need". Applying these figures to the District's own model shows a need for *3,700 fewer homes over the Plan period*. This would save the District the need to build three estates the size of Warwick Gates, or three estates the size of Chase Meadows.

This has huge implications for the number and location of designated building sites and also for the vexed issues of road congestion and pollution, as well as schools and other services.

Public statements by Council leaders and from senior officers have reflected the apparent pressure on them from developers, ministers and government planning inspectors to ramp up the numbers. We now see that the Draft is not based on the best evidence and is unfit for the necessary Public Examination before an inspector in its present form.

Another key element of pressure has been the requirement for a five year supply of available building land, if the planning committee is to exercise control. The calculation of this land supply has been a contested issue, while WDC officers have only recently recognised that it is time they looked again at this. On the new ONS figures, the requirement for land must be substantially reduced. It is very likely the District does have at least a 5 year supply. It's high time this was firmly established so that the Council gets a better grip on applications to build here, there, and everywhere.

A New District HQ. Why Build it and Where?

Local authorities have been put under an intense funding squeeze, with year on year reductions by central government, so of course they are looking for economies. The trouble is that a hasty, short

Talks and events

Leamington Society Awards, 2014

Thursday, July 10th, 7.15 for 7.30
Conference Centre, Dormer Place

The first event after the summer interval will be a talk

Richard III: the King under the Car Park

by Mathew Morris

Archaeologist, University of Leicester

Thursday, September 18, 7.30
Conference Centre, Dormer Place

Details of this talk and the calendar of all events for the coming year will be included with the August Newsletter

facilitation company for the public sector funded jointly by the William Pears Group and the Winston Group (who have two directors in common with PSP). PSP will fund the design of this project, to the tune of £674,000, in exchange for some share of profits from the site (will the council pay rent?), unless the project fails, when costs will be treated “differently” – how differently is commercially sensitive and secret.



Green open space outside Royal Spa Centre

Riverside House site and Court Street car park will be sold for housing development and the money used to finance the project. WDC describes this plan as “capital cost neutral” without explaining what that means. Selling the valuable building sites at

Riverside House and Court Street will raise capital – so perhaps WDC are assuming their new HQ will be as valuable as the land sold? And the value of the proposed Spa Centre green site is implicitly set at zero: “a low value (in financial terms) area of amenity land”. It would be worth a lot in the unlikely event of its being sold on the open market with planning permission for building.

Timetable

The proposed schedule is incredible: the brief and design for the new building will be created in parallel, rather than in sequence; by the end of July 2014 both will be completed. WDC expect to appoint a building contractor by the end of 2014; achieve planning permission by January 2015; building to start April 2015; to move in August 2016. They hope to save £300,000 annually in overhead costs (almost £1,000 per day!), which may explain the rush.

EC Harris consultation

In 2011 WDC commissioned a report from EC Harris on the best use of major council-owned assets, which is not cited and has been ignored. ECH alternatives included the sale / development of Bedford Street and / or Packington Place car parks and the development of Spencers Yard and /or Town Hall.

From 2012-4 WDC planned to relocate to Court Street to regenerate Old Town. Housing on Court Street is now thought to be better. The sale of Riverside House site and / or Court Street will raise capital for the move but these sales are not contingent on the current plan and should be considered independently and separately.

Alternative strategies

“A number of alternative locations have therefore been appraised” – but not many: EC Harris’ for example.

WDC discussed the possibility of staying in Riverside House and letting the surplus space and rejected this on the grounds that “we had been advertising available space within Riverside House for a period of years without success and current market assessments are that *“there is no current demand for office space in the town”* (emphasis added). If this is true, there must be many landlords seeking to let office space at favourable rates.

