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# The Leamington Society Newsletter

**May 2015**

This issue of our Newsletter has been held back to report on the result of the recent news about the Local Plan.

## **Chairman's Notes**

### Now it Really is Back to the Drawing Board

Perhaps we should be careful about what we wish for. Community voices have been saying for at least the last year that the District's Local Plan was unsound. The Inspector has agreed, but not for the reasons we had suggested. I have summarised the main points – and offer some implications – in a separate article below.

### Warwick District: A Great Place to Live and Breathe?

One consequence of the Inspector's finding may well be worsening pollution around Warwick and Leamington. Especially so if WDC persists in locating huge numbers of extra houses in sprawling car dependent suburbs.

Many more people's lives are shortened by poor air quality than die in road accidents. While a motorway pile-up attracts banner headlines and sensational pictures, pollution is unseen and lacks drama. No screech of tyres or shocking impact – just a stealthy undermining of public health which neither central nor local government is inclined to take seriously. “We'll do our best” is about as tough or decisive as it gets as a policy statement.

Recent Courier headlines have offered conflicting advice: air quality is improving, then again it's serious and needs tackling. That mirrors divided comment from not very joined up local councils. County does the roads, while District is legally responsible for air quality.

This is quite a technical subject, with emissions of CO<sub>2</sub> and NO<sub>x</sub> but also diesel particulates. There is a move locally to understand the issues better and to demand that air quality is no longer an afterthought in public policy. I hope the Newsletter will return to this in later months.

### Motes and Beams

Opposite the Town Hall you may have noticed a change just lately and decidedly for the better. “Bills” is no longer glaring out at the Parade with its ‘in your face’ huge illuminated sign.

It's been nearly a year and a half since the Council suggested this aggressive sign was out of place in a conservation area; then issued a discontinuance order, which was appealed and then the planning inspectorate took six months before finally making up its mind to reject the appeal.

## **Talks and events**

The first event after the summer interval will be a talk by Sylvia Pinches

### **The rich housekeeper of Warwick Castle**

Thursday, September 10, 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

Many thanks to members Dr. Andrew Cave and Richard Ward for pursuing this

It's surprising that Bill locally was so stubborn about this, since branches in other towns had shown more appreciation of their surroundings. But my title alludes to a more recent ugly sin committed by Warwick District itself, only just down the street and right by the entrance to the Jephson Gardens. I refer of course to the WDC sponsored advert for a Vauxhall dealer. It would be nice to think that council enforcement officers might contemplate action against their colleagues to remove this outrage. Sadly, we may have to put up with it for quite a while and accept that in Riverside House there are people who will stick a price tag on anything but fail to recognize its value.

**Richard Ashworth**

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**Inspector finds Warwick District Local Plan Unsound**

A government planning inspector presided over four days of hearings in the Town Hall, with local planning officers on one side and local developers down the other. Interested parties sat at the end.

These sessions examined three key hurdles (listed below) before considering any further detail and each was split into a long list of questions about numbers, separated from their practical consequences and disregarding the plan as a whole.

A commendable three weeks after the hearing the Inspector sent his conclusions to the Council.

1. Duty to Co-operate

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) requires co-operation between neighbouring authorities: Coventry City and the other Districts of Warwickshire. The central issue is Coventry's very large projected housing need: how might some of this be shared out? Consultations on this only began in earnest last year, after Coventry's Local Plan was rejected but the process still has a long way to go. The inspector questioned planning officials from each authority in turn, to reveal a muddle. Each council is at a different stage with its Local Plan, while they are required to achieve a joint housing strategy for the whole area – based on official population projections which have shifted markedly from one year to the next.

Because WDC had been talking to its neighbours, the inspector concluded that it had fulfilled this legal duty – even though he failed them on other matters because there is not yet an agreed joint strategy.

Consultation has been through joint committees, typically composed of council leaders and chief executives. The WDC barrister excused the delays as requiring “political buy-in”. Geoffrey Renshaw pointed out that there was a democratic deficit: joint policy was being delivered to councils for their assent without open debate, let alone public discussion. The inspector seemed to stifle a hint of amusement and the barrister opined “Well you know how it works sir.” Which was very much the point we were making.

This matters, at a time of major debate about devolution of power and finance, but to what form of authority - big city groups, unitary authorities, counties, districts? Someone will have to lead in coordinating plans even if it is no longer called a regional strategy. Localism is a hollow concept.

## 2. Overall Housing Provision

Dave Barber, lead officer for the Plan, was repeatedly questioned on this, with long arguments over detail. Developers and their agents urged higher provision while community spokesmen queried the projections of population growth for Coventry.

The inspector's letter is blunt: he is satisfied that the population figures used by WDC are correct, based on the most up to date national projections and employing reasonable assumptions. He ignores the evidence from Geoffrey Renshaw and Ray Bullen that the projections for Coventry are exaggerated. Is it credible that Coventry's population will keep on growing at a rate three times faster than other comparable cities in the UK?

The curiosity to question such volatile figures is strangely lacking. Inspectors exercise their powers with due regard to the legal framework. While courts present judgements with a review of evidence and reasons it is disappointing that his letter has no review of the evidence.

On this hangs the fate of our environment: no-one ever "undevelops" suburbs

The inspector's focus was the total for the whole Coventry and Warwickshire area, plus some discussion of Birmingham and Solihull's overspill. Remarkably, his letter states that there is no evidence of constraints to prevent the whole sub-regional housing need being met in full, which sounds very bold, when he did not consider any site locations or the major factor of the Green Belt. Later on he says "It is not the case that the Local Plan should necessarily accommodate all of the residual unmet need from the rest of the HMA (area)", but this is followed by a clear statement of the decisive failure of the WDC Plan - "the absence of a clear strategy" to meet the overall need in full. Logically all our neighbours are also failures.

## 3. The Supply and Delivery of Housing Land

This day was also all about numbers, with particular concentration on "windfall" sites. The letter concludes that there had been double counting and the windfall numbers in the WDC plan are optimistic. Further, it considers there has been persistent under delivery of housing in the last five years so a 20% buffer is applied on top of the planned figures (in accordance with NPPF rules). The result of all this number crunching is that WDC falls well short on its required five year supply of housing land.

This assertion on the 5 year land supply is grim, leaving WDC critically exposed to rampant demands from developers which will be hard to resist. Local groups have protested at the delay in up-dating this vital measure; we believe that WDC's information and analysis are incomplete.

### Further Thoughts

The draft Plan was pushed through in April 2014, as a defence against new applications. The submitted Plan then stuck to 720 houses per annum, even though later projections had indicated a need for only 600. The extra 120 was a gesture towards Coventry's needs.

The inspector failed them on Housing Need anyway and also failed them on Land Supply for the 720 figure. A new Plan may have to wait for years while a sub-regional strategy is agreed. Not only does this seem rough justice, it is undoubtedly bad planning.

Small shifts in household size are acknowledged as a critical factor in calculating housing need. Logically the number of houses per hectare is equally critical for land requirements, but the inspector did not question WDC's low density "garden suburbs" policy when considering land supply.



behalf of the Society. Richard Ashworth was enthusiastically thanked for all his work.

There was a break to enjoy the excellent sandwiches and snacks prepared by Dorothy Clark and Ruth Bennion.

After the break Archie Pitts gave an update on the progress of the Pump Room Gardens bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund. More on this below.

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**Pump Rooms Garden project – in bullet points**

The preparation of the bid for almost £900,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund is reaching its final stages and is on course to be submitted in August.

- If the bid is successful, the money from HLF will be supplemented by matched funding of £100,000 from Warwick District Council and £100,000 raised by the Friends of the Pump Room Gardens (a group under the aegis of the Leamington Society).
- The Friends have now fulfilled their commitment thanks to many generous pledges and particularly that from the Royal Leamington Spa Building Conservation Trust.
- There will be the opportunity to add embellishments to the project if the partnership can raise extra funds from external grant making bodies.
- Restoration will include a full overhaul of the Grade II listed bandstand, including opening up the long-sealed undercroft to be used again for storage, including seating for bands.
- The bandstand is the focal point of the gardens, visually and for community events. Regretably it is also the focal point for disruptive behaviour. The plans propose up-lighting in the ground around the base and CCTV targeted on the bandstand.
- There will also be restoration of the paths and clearing the riverbank to open up views of the river.
- A new drainage system is needed to alleviate the waterlogging of the gardens, particularly at the west end.
- Tree works and new trees are included.
- The general layout of the gardens will be largely unchanged; events should continue much as they do at present.
- The project will include a five year programme of events and activities with a Community Engagement Officer to oversee the programme. The CEO will aim to make these events self-sustaining like the Peace Festival (now in its 37th year).
- WDC will commit to a maintaining the gardens to the new standard including seeking Green Flag Award status for the gardens.

**Archie Pitts, Chairman, Friends of the Pump Room Gardens**

















**New members**

We welcome to our Society

Michael Ian Crawshaw and Catherine Fiona Smith

Mr Clifford and Mrs Carol Veasey

Adrian Gains and Mary Paterson

Graham and Maggie Williams

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**Leamington Society Newsletters on-line**

Members are reminded that all our newsletters since August 2004 are available in colour on our website [www.LeamingtonSociety.org.uk](http://www.LeamingtonSociety.org.uk)

All members who have provided the society with an up-to-date email address should receive reminders of any coming talk or event. The reminders are sent out approximately a week before the occasion and again the day or so before. If you do not receive these reminders but would like to, please let a member of the committee know.

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<i>The Leamington Society is a registered charity. It is a member of the West Midlands Amenity Societies Association and the National Organisation of Residents' Associations. It exists to preserve the heritage and improve the character of Royal Leamington Spa and to encourage high standards of planning and architecture</i>	
<i>Charity No. 516078</i>	
<i>Unless otherwise indicated, views expressed in these newsletters are the contributors' own and not necessarily the corporate view of the Society</i>	