

Castle and Westcotes Community Meeting

Your Community, Your Voice

Record of Meeting and Actions

6:30 pm, Wednesday, 27 October 2010
Held at: The Watershed, Upperton Road

Who was there:

Councillor Neil Clayton
Councillor Andy Connelly
Councillor Patrick Kitterick
Councillor Sarah Russell
Councillor Lynn Senior

1. ELECTION OF CHAIR

Councillor Russell was elected as Chair for the meeting.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members were asked to declare any interests they had in the business on the agenda, and/or indicate that Section 106 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 applied to them.

Councillor Senior declared a personal interest in case any highways matters came up during the meeting due to the fact that her partner worked in the traffic section of Leicester City Council. Council Senior also declared a personal interest in the budget application for the cultural quarter because as she owned a property on Charles Street.

3. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the Joint Castle and Westcotes Community Meeting held on 18 November 2009 were agreed as a correct record.

4. BUDGET APPLICATIONS

There were three budget applications for consideration at the meeting. These related purely to the Castle Ward budget and only Castle Ward Councillors were able to give their formal view on them.

Application 1 – Request for rear alley-way gate on Lower Hastings Street at a cost of £500.

A resident commented that there was a definite need for these gates as alley ways were being used by drug takers and vagrants, causing anti social behaviour. The Police also supported their installation.

It was noted that all residents affected would need to agree to the installation of the gates.

It was also noted that other areas that wanted alley gates could apply for Community Meeting budget funding for them.

AGREED:

that the application be supported and a sum of £500 be allocated from the Ward Action Plan budget, subject to final approval from the Cabinet Lead

for Front Line Service Improvement and Neighbourhoods and the Leader of the Council.

Application 2 – Playground Improvements at the former Welford Road Recreation Ground

Francis Connolly, Member Support Officer informed the meeting that he had spoken with Parks Officers who had informed him that there was funding available from Section 106 monies. (These are where developers provide funding for facilities such as parks, schools or roads as part of planning approvals when they put up developments.) This could be available to fund improvements to the playground area and the recreation ground.

A resident spoke strongly in favour of the improvements, particularly as it would be good for children from the hospital and those visiting people in the prison.

AGREED:

that ideas for designs of improvements and amounts of funding available be brought to the next meeting of the Castle Community Meeting.

Application 3 – Cultural Quarter Christmas Switch On – funding of £2000 requested.

This funding was requested to support the Cultural Quarter Christmas switch on event, to cover the cost of stilt walkers, craft workshops and stage entertainment.

Councillors commented that as there was only £5000 left in the budget, it was felt that £2000 would take too much of it at this time. It was proposed that £500 be given to support the event.

There was some discussion about the merits of Castle ward funding an event which was for people all around the city. It was however noted that there were large number of residents in the St. Georges area and the city centre.

AGREED:

that the application be supported and a sum of £500 be allocated from the Ward Community Fund budget and that this be directed towards craft workshops, subject to final approval from the Cabinet Lead for Front Line Service Improvement and Neighbourhoods and the Leader of the Council.

5. STUDENT ACCOMMODATION AND LOCAL HOUSING ISSUES / PLANNING ISSUES

Councillor Russell introduced the next item which was taking together to the two items on the agenda together as one, as there were strongly linked issues. She noted that the De Montfort University Vice Chancellor and Jamie Lewis, local property developer had been invited to the meeting, but were unable to attend. They had however been invited to the next Westcotes Community Meeting.

It was intended to cover the following areas in the discussion:-

- Rental properties being kept in order.
- Problems with 'To Let' signs.
- Future student developments – density? how much? appropriateness?
- Empty properties resulting from student developments.
- Issues relating to students and green space.
- Specific developments – DeMontfort University Leisure Centre, supermarket development off Braunstone Gate / New Park Street and a proposed block of student accommodation on Upperton Road.

It was queried how residents were able to find out about planned student developments.

Residents were able to put themselves on a weekly email list from the Planning Section at the Council, where they could be informed of all planning proposals. Residents could make representations on planning applications themselves or their Councillor could do it for them. Signs were also placed in the vicinity of planned developments.

A resident commented that his German friend was horrified at the idea that all student developments were located close to each other, near to a university – this would never happen in Germany. He also felt that the Council was too accepting of developments associated with the University and not enough in favour resident's point of view.

Councillor Kitterick pointed out that the Council didn't have the planning rules in place to be able to stop student accommodation developments going ahead or determine where they could be located. When an application on Tudor Road was opposed by the Council, a planning inspector overruled the decision and charged the Council costs awarded to the developer, in the region of £100,000.

Steve Brown, Team Leader in the Planning Section commented that the approach in Leicester had been to locate student accommodation as close as possible to Universities for sustainable reasons and it avoided disruption in residential areas. Current development policies maintained this approach, to avoid using mainstream housing for students. This had been the policy for some time, going back to the 1990s.

A resident raised a concern that Leicester University had cut off a right of way in Lancaster Place.

Councillor Kitterick said that he was aware of the issues and was looking into the matter.

A resident noted that the proposed policy in the Council's Local Development Framework, on the location of student accommodation talked of integrating the developments with existing local communities. He felt that this hadn't been

achieved. Further it was commented that it wasn't possible to have cohesion in an area where there were low number of permanent residents.

Councillor Kitterick commented that it was a dilemma with regard to the location of student accommodation. Students needed to stay somewhere, and there was a debate to be had whether purpose built accommodation where there was greater control on behaviour or within neighbourhoods where problems have been caused with noise etc.

There was further discussion about the issue of students living in residential areas in Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMOs), where groups of unrelated people lived together in residential properties. It was noted that rules put in place by the last government restricting, to some extent, residential houses changing to this HMO classification had been rescinded by the current government. However it was also noted that new rules were coming forward where it was likely to be possible that the Council would be able to remove 'permitted development rights' on certain streets. This could include restricting the right to turn a residential property into a HMO, but it still wouldn't be impossible.

It was further acknowledged that even with the rule changes outlined above, there was still a difficulty with regard to re-balancing streets and neighbourhoods which have largely been made up of HMOs back into family housing.

Councillor Connelly also made a comment that the Council and the Universities didn't support all student accommodation developments and some had been rejected, such as a proposal on Paton Street.

A resident commented further that students weren't always that well controlled in purpose built accommodation. There were issues with them causing problems around the area of the Filbert Village development.

A resident raised a question about what powers were available to ensure landlord's properties were maintained and dealing with empty properties.

Carole Thompson from the Council's Empty Homes Team explained to the meeting that her team were able to investigate empty houses and had been very successful in getting them back into use. It could be a lengthy process but it had proved successful in getting 1200 empty houses across the city back into use.

Steve Brown commented that from a planning perspective, there was little that could be done with regard to requiring owners of properties to keep them maintained. It would need to be a serious health hazard before action could be taken.

Further issues were to be discussed under the waste and recycling item.

The issue of Section 106 monies was raised – It was queried how people could find out what money there was and how it was spent or was intended to be spent.

Section 106 monies were where developers, as part of their planning approval were required to pay funding towards local facilities and services which were affected as a result of the development. This often meant funds were provided for schools, parks and roads.

It was agreed to discuss this issue in greater detail at the next meeting the Westcotes Community Meeting, when details would be provided of what funding was available.

Councillors commented that it was important that the public were made aware of this money as it could be useful to make improvements such as those planned for the Nelson Mandela park playground. It was also felt that there was significant money available for improvements.

To Let signs were also raised as a problem. A large number of those present felt that they blighted the area, were often unnecessary and were an advert for burglars.

Steve Brown commented that there were difficulties associated with tackling these signs. There was a legal right for these signs to be displayed. He noted that there was a power to remove permitted development rights for these signs, but this was generally only used in conservation areas. He said that Planning Officers were contacting letting agents about these signs, but they often weren't very helpful. Councillor Kitterick commented that even if restrictions could be achieved in conservation areas it could tackle problems on Stretton Road and Lower Hastings Street.

It was agreed to set up a small group containing residents and relevant local agencies to discuss particular problem areas with signs and build up a body of evidence that could support action to tackle the problem with to let signs.

It was requested that local developer Jamie Lewis be sent the minutes of this meeting.

Comments were invited on the following planning applications.

Residents could make their own comments on the design or other aspects of the planning applications, by contacting the Council on 252 7000.

De Montfort University Leisure Centre Planning Application.

Residents noted that a previous application, some time ago for the football club had required public access to gym facilities, but this ended up with a cost of £1000 per year. It was therefore requested that public access be granted on a reasonable basis with regard to cost and times.

It was generally agreed that a representation on the application be made that public access to the leisure centre should cost the same as a Council facility.

Supermarket on the MFI site - Planning Application

Councillor Russell said that a large number of representations were expected on this application. She and Councillor Connelly would be undertaking their own shopping habits survey with residents.

Comments were made with regard to parking. It was felt that this application should be subject to the same rules as other businesses in the area. It was also commented that some of the parking spaces should be made available for general shoppers to Braunstone Gate. Steve Brown commented that this provision was put in place when MFI developed the site and he felt there was a strong case for the same to happen on this application.

It was also commented that measures needed to be put in place to avoid shopping trolleys blighting the area.

It was requested that the supermarket design be of a high quality. It was felt that the design proposed on the plans was not of architectural merit.

It was suggested that representations be made to retain the trees / green space which ran alongside Narborough Road.

More generally residents felt that a supermarket would lead to worsening traffic problems. Steve Brown commented that a travel plan was included in the planning application.

Steve Brown also informed the meeting that a financial appraisal was included in the planning application, as part of which the developer claimed that due to the unusual costs associated with the development, they would not be able to afford any Section 106 costs.

Student accommodation development on Upperton Road

A planning application had been submitted for a 14 story block of student accommodation of Upperton Road, on a strip of land alongside the Great Central Way.

The initial reaction of residents was one of great opposition and concern; it was felt that such a development was wholly inappropriate for such a location and was a step too far in an area which already had too much student accommodation.

Councillors commented that this application came as a surprise as it was thought that the land would be owned by Barratts, the developer of the Freemans Meadow site.

Residents were advised to keep an eye out for the proposals when they were published on the Council's website.

There was some debate about the likelihood of such a proposal being approved on this site, noting that it was some distance away from other high rise developments.

Although one resident felt that it wasn't that far away from the planned 22 storey tower as part of a development on Eastern Boulevard.

Doubts were also raised about access to the site and whether adjacent site owners would be happy with such a development.

Other Developments – Eastern Boulevard

There was further discussion about the approved student accommodation development on Eastern Boulevard which included a 22 storey tower. A resident commented that they felt that this proposal was probably worse for residents than that proposed on Upperton Road. She also pointed out that she had requested details of the affect on residents during the build, where any crane would be located and where materials would be stored. It was agreed to raise this concern with Building Control to establish what measures could be put in place to protect residents' amenity.

It was also noted by the meeting that no date had at present been indicated as to when the development would be started.

Other Developments – Car Park on Filbert Street

It was noted that consent for this car park had been discussed at the Council's Planning and Development Control Committee on the night prior to this meeting, where it had been given temporary approval for a year from the date of the Committee. Councillor Kitterick informed the meeting that he had vigorously opposed the application at the Committee, but when the vote took place, the Committee agreed with the officers' view that upon appeal, the Council would be likely to lose. Restrictions had been imposed on the car park which restricted the number of cars that could be parked there and the operating hours. He also commented that he had been assured that when the approval was up for renewal in a years' time, there would be sufficient evidence in place for it to be refused on a permanent basis.

Residents raised an issue with regard to the dusty unfinished nature of the car park surface. Councillor Kitterick commented that to ask them to tarmac it would almost be an invitation to make the car park permanent.

Some residents expressed concern about whether there was a willingness to take residents concerns into account in planning decisions. Councillors commented that they fully respected the professional opinion of planning officers, and that they were never given cause to doubt them in providing the correct guidance, taking all relevant planning rules into account. Officers would be working to produce planning rules which could successfully defeat unwanted planning applications.

Action	Officer Identified	Deadline
A small group of residents and relevant agencies meet to discuss problems with To Let signs.	Councillor Russell / Member Support Officer	ongoing

That the minutes of the meeting be sent to Jamie Lewis	Matthew Reeves	November
A representation to be made on the De Montfort University Leisure Centre application stating that public access to the Leisure centre should cost the same as a Council facility	Westcotes Ward Councillors	At the relevant Planning and Development Control Committee
That the issues regarding the construction of the student accommodation on Eastern Boulevard be raised with building control to see what mitigating measures can be put in place to protect residents' amenity.	Member Support Officer	November

6. BURGLARY

Kelvin Bates, Community Safety Team Leader introduced this item.

- His role was to ensure that the Council took issues around crime into consideration in everything that the Council did.
- He also mentioned details about the Safer Leicester Partnership, which involved all key public and voluntary sector agencies in the city who came together to consider crime and the wider issues around it.
- On burglary he explained that due to a range of efforts, the rate in the city as a whole was down 17% compared to the previous year. It was a 33% reduction for Westcotes and 25% for Castle.
- One of the methods to reduce burglary was 'target hardening', which was where measures such as extra door locks, window locks, kick boards and bars across louver windows were installed. Smart water, a liquid which could only be seen under ultra violet light was also used and could identify which house the item of property came from.
- Work was also undertaken with offenders, to get them off drugs and to get them into employment or training, this had proven successful in getting prolific offenders out of a life of crime.

A resident enquired how areas were chosen to be target hardened. Kelvin explained that this was based on burglary statistics.

A further query was raised about where smart water could be obtained. It was indicated that this was available at either Hinckley Road Local Police Unit or at Mansfield House in the city centre.

A comment was made that speed bumps were useful in stopping burglaries. Police representatives felt that this wasn't the case.

7. WASTE AND RECYLCING

Due to lengthy discussions on planning / housing issues, this item was not considered, however residents were invited to put their names down to receive further information about waste and recycling schemes in the area.

8. CLOSE OF MEETING

The meeting closed at 9.10pm.