

HANLEY CASTLE PARISH COUNCIL

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For the attention of Mr. Richard Quallington, Chief Executive.

16th. May 2008

Dear Mr. Quallington,

Recently, as you may be aware, there has been much to-ing and fro-ing regarding the proposal to construct affordable housing at Hanley Swan. The scheme was introduced to us by Alan Saunders, then RHE for this area though shortly after Mr. Parry's introduction, Mr. Saunders' position was taken by Nigel Potter. Mr. Potter attended one Parish Council Meeting on the 18th. May 2006 but other than this we have not seen him since.

Following a housing needs survey which was carried out in our Parish (the results of which were delivered direct to Mr. Potter by the responders), two suitable plots of land were identified in the Parish - both rural exception sites. Subsequently, an open public meeting/exhibition was held in our Village Hall, which provided West Mercia Housing with sufficient feedback to allow selection of the site and the housing needs survey was used to guide them in the determination of the quantity and 'mix' of the housing to be provided. The Parish Council was provided with very rudimentary figures to justify the proposal – at no time were we shown the full results of the survey.

As this matter progressed, we published by various means the information we received – our quarterly newsletter and our web site being the main vehicles. When the planning application was made by West Mercia Housing, a great deal of interest was aroused in our residents. As you might expect, those living close to the chosen site had something to say but a large number of folk more remote from the site also had comments to make. In total, some 80 objections were registered with the planning officers at MHDC. Subsequently, questions were raised by residents and our Council as to the availability of the full results of the housing needs survey and so our Parish Council requested sight of these from Nigel Potter. Suffice to say that no results were provided despite several requests through various channels. Finally, in response to one specific question to Peter Newman of MHDC, it became apparent that properly collated and analysed results were in fact *not* available. The full email conversation which took place to get to that point is available for your consideration, should you so require. This raised many doubts in the minds of our Parish Council and residents. Such was the heat of the local debate that the Parish Council decided to hold an

open meeting to air all views: this took place on 19th. March last and the attendees included Lisa Mason (Project Manager, West Mercia Housing); the architect; the contractor; Peter Newman and Keith Parry who stood in for Nigel Potter who was otherwise engaged. The meeting was chaired by Tom Wells, County Councillor.

At the open meeting, Peter Newman had to admit that, indeed, no full collation of results had been prepared, much to the annoyance of a number people present, including our Parish Council. We asked for the spreadsheet (assumed to exist) of raw data so that we might be able to collate it ourselves but it was revealed that this was not available and the results so far had been produced by hand on a sheet of paper. Mr. Newman promised to arrange for Nigel Potter to provide a full analysis of the survey within 14 days of the meeting. In fact, 15 days later, Keith Parry delivered to us a report which was riddled with errors. Our (and our residents') analysis showed that the figures provided were erroneous to the extent that some of the 'need' was not stated accurately.

The upshot of this was that the planning application for the proposal was withdrawn at the eleventh hour, we presume on the basis of inaccurate figures having been presented.

Subsequent to this, we requested a meeting to discuss these findings and four members of our Council (Sue Roberts [PC Chairman], Ian Thompson [Vice Chairman], Sue Adeney and John Taverner) presented themselves at your offices at Willow Park on 24th. April to meet with Lisa Mason (West Mercia Housing), Peter Newman, Keith Parry and Nigel Potter. Despite our excitement at the prospect of meeting Mr. Potter again, we were deflated to discover that his car had suffered some mechanical failure 'on the way to the meeting' and he was being transported to his home by the breakdown service. Nonetheless, the meeting went ahead and Keith Parry presented an edited report which this time showed the housing need to be around *half* of that presented in the previous report, and he asked the Parish Council to accept the new report as being a true reflection of the survey output. You may imagine the astonishment of our Council members, and that of Lisa Mason at hearing of this massive change in survey results. We expressed our deep concern at the validity of the whole survey process and stated that it would be absolutely impossible for us to persuade our residents that we could put trust in the report, having regard to the way the output figures had jumped around over the preceding month. Following an apology from Keith Parry as to this parlous state of affairs, and despite some gentle reluctance from Messrs. Parry and Newman, we eventually made them realise that the only sensible way forward would be to conduct a new survey and let our Parish Council audit the results – we had been denied this opportunity previously on the basis of confidentiality, a dubious reason in our view.

The current status of the project is that we have been delivered an example of the new survey forms (different to the last survey) for our perusal and comment prior to them being delivered (during July) to our residents for completion and return to the elusive Nigel Potter.

We must make several observations in this matter:

1. Considering that the Rural Housing Enabler's main job is the conducting of housing needs surveys and recommending projects based upon the results of those surveys, we believe that he should be censured for failing miserably to (a) get the job done accurately; (b) deliver full survey results and report prior to being forced to by us and (c) aid an audit of the results by our Parish Council
2. Despite Nigel Potter being the local RHE, it appears that Keith Parry has been instrumental in attempting to manage this debacle. It seems to us that he has done his very best to keep things on track but has been frustrated by many factors along the way. We have no truck with way in which Keith Parry has handled his affairs – we believe that he has not been properly supported in this matter.

3. It is evident that West Mercia Housing has suffered a great deal of expense in preparing for this project, all of which it seems was on the basis of un-verified and un-supportable survey results. No doubt they will have their own comments to make.
4. Our Parish Council has been placed in an embarrassing position because of the RHE's failings. We naively supported the affordable housing project on the basis of the results provided by a professional at the outset but when we started to look deeper and ask (what might be classed as 'awkward') questions it became plain that our expectations regarding the veracity of the data presented at worst were not shared by the RHE or at best were not understood by him.
5. We recognise that we are likely not to be the only Parish being subjected to this process under the stewardship of Nigel Potter. We wonder (a) if the same circumstances prevail in other Parishes and (b) how many schemes have been pushed through elsewhere on the basis of shoddy data analysis where the locals have been more subservient. We await your comments before making contact with the other Parishes so involved.
6. Whilst our Parish Council remains broadly in favour of an affordable housing scheme in our Parish it has to be recognised that such a scheme *must* reflect the local need. In view of the various other schemes which are either completed or in progress in neighbouring Parishes, we have to be *absolutely certain* that any scheme supported by us does not serve simply to mop up demand from outside our area because a flawed survey has overstated the need in our Parish and caused unnecessary surplus housing to be provided.

In summary, you need to realise that the sequence of events described above has served only to reinforce our and our residents' scepticism as to the principles of affordable housing and the trustworthiness of the people and processes employed to judge their desirability. Therefore we ask (a) for your comments; (b) for your assertions as to the correctness of future survey results and (c) your statement as to what action is being taken procedurally to redress the position and prevent a recurrence of this whole sorry state of affairs both here and in other Parishes.

We look forward to your rapid response.

Yours sincerely

Ian Thompson
Vice Chairman, on behalf of Hanley Castle Parish Council