



Annual Town Meeting Saffron Walden 14th March 2023

Planning & Transport Committee

Chair's Report – from Cllr Patrick Hawke-Smith

The Planning and Transport Committee meets twice a month to consider current planning matters, especially upcoming applications, and ongoing transport issues, particularly highway management. It has met eighteen times since the previous report including fifteen since I became Chair in May. During that period, it has reviewed 181 planning applications, an average of ten per meeting.

Planning:

The Town Council is a statutory consultee and so the Planning and Transport Committee is invited to comment on all planning applications within our parish area. These can vary from minor alterations to private homes to detailed applications for large-scale housing and industrial developments, running to many thousands of pages. Final decisions are made by the local planning authority, which is Uttlesford District Council (UDC); however, while UDC is under special government measures, applications can be directly submitted to the Planning Inspectorate. SWTC's comments to planning applications are given due consideration during the decision making process.

The Town Council often takes responsibility for public open spaces and other amenities or benefits associated with new developments, and so we seek appropriate 'Section 106' contributions from the developers, maintaining a list of initiatives that we want to pursue with such support. We work closely with UDC to oversee the progress of construction works and ensure that criteria are properly met and that contributions are paid on time. We hold monthly meetings with UDC staff to discuss significant applications affecting Saffron Walden, which are attended by members of the P&T Committee and Town Council staff.

Thanks to the good offices of its staff, the public open space transfer at the Bloor Homes site at Ashdon Road is now complete and progress is being made with the POS transfer with the Linden Homes Site at Radwinter Road. During the year, Councillors and staff have had productive discussions with representatives of Redrow Homes, leading to improvements to their plans for a housing development at Shire Hill, and with Stonebond Properties about their scheme on Ashdon Road.

In less welcome developments, this year has seen applications approved from Rosconn to build 233 homes at a site on Radwinter Road and from Chase New Homes to create 96 dwellings on the Friends School site. The Rosconn application had been rejected by the UDC Planning Committee but was upheld on appeal by the Planning Inspector, despite the Town Council's representations, primarily because Essex Highways withdrew their original objections; the planned development is currently within Seward's End parish but is more closely aligned to Saffron Walden and may be transferred to the town with a significant impact on our facilities.

The Chase New Homes application was made directly to the Planning Inspector and granted by them, again despite SWTC's representations, and also those of Sports England.

At the time of writing, a major new application for 170 houses on land west of Thaxted Road is being made directly to the Planning Inspector by developer Kier. The Town Council objects to Kier's proposals in principle for various reasons, including because of the loss of open space and the lack of realistic sustainable transport options, and in detail, because of inadequate community benefit in the designs, and we now await the Inspector's decision.

On a positive note, the adoption of a Neighbourhood Plan for Saffron Walden has been successfully achieved this year. The draft Neighbourhood Plan was overwhelmingly supported in a referendum in September. Our new Plan is now being accorded due weight in planning decisions affecting the town and is a valuable measure against which to consider applications. Its adoption is the culmination of many years' work by past and present Councillors, Town Council staff and a healthy number of volunteers, and I wish to pay tribute to all their judicious endeavours.

Highways and Transport:

At Saffron Walden Town Council, we strongly encourage sustainable transport and continually press Essex County Council, as the relevant highways agency, to implement policies and practical improvements here to that end. Unfortunately, we have not met with great success so far.

For instance, in December 2021 we submitted nine sustainable transport applications under the Essex Local Highway Panel (LHP) process, including two pedestrian islands, four zebra crossings, cycle links, a formalised footpath, and permanent pavement extensions on George Street. Since then, we have regularly chased Essex, but their LHP process has been very slow and most of these schemes have yet to pass the first stage of "validation".

The situation regarding cycle infrastructure is especially disappointing when we look over the border from Essex to Cambridgeshire. Our County Council has few resources available for cycling and so we have been hampered in improving cycle links around the town, despite having 'Section 106' money in hand.

More positively, 20mph signage is being permanently installed to help slow traffic and encourage sustainable transport; bollards have been introduced to protect the Old Sun Inn on Church Street; and we are hopeful that Essex Highways will implement our plan to part-pedestrianise the town centre, in line with public opinion.

Over the course of the year, the Planning and Transport Committee has benefited from the excellent work of the Council staff and the commitment and leadership of Councillor Paul Gadd, who is also of course our County Councillor.