

THE CONSULTATION PROCESS

Dear Mr Ashcroft,

I have considered long and hard before deciding to write to you with regard to Consultation Process and the questions you pose. In our previous paper to you we outlined the series of attempts to obtain information about the process that finally led us to resort to a Freedom of Information request. We did not include the more unpleasant human factors that came into play. To allow you some understanding of this it is necessary to write in a more discursive and emotive style for which apologies.

I am well used to the 'rough and tumble' of boardroom politics and how poor leadership can influence the 'health' of institutions and processes. I am consequently moved to describe to you some of the systemic intimidation and bullying that occurred led by the Neighbourhood Planning Team. I strongly suspect that people left that team due to the same sorts of behaviour internally. What I observed first hand was systematic and quite subtle manipulation of 'facts' and orchestration of group feelings to drive decisions in favour of the NPC's conclusions.

Throughout this process a group of us (SWAV) has tried our utmost to enter into meaningful, transparent and mature dialogue with the NPC. We have a vested interest in the choice of site, but so do a large number of other parishioners. We recognise the need for housing and are certainly open to the idea that if, via a well run, inclusive and fair process, in line with local and national policy, the Six Acres were to be the chosen site then the village would have spoken.

When we realised the process was underway we tried to join in. The refusal to email us a Questionnaire when we were abroad was our first inkling that this process might not be running in an inclusive fashion. We requested and were refused information several times. I offered to help the NPC in terms of information sharing and a neighbour (Nicola Maytum) offered to be on the NPC. It seemed likely that no one who lived anywhere near the Six Acre site was going to be allowed on or near the NPC. Regardless of facts the process was leading inexorably towards the Six Acres as the chosen site by the NPC. We decided to seek some clarity about how this had happened. The choice of the Six Acres flew in the face of National and Local policy and the Site Assessments are deeply flawed. Still we thought maybe there was some logic. We agreed we would have to resort to a FoI request to understand the process being applied. By this time there had been a number of unpleasant email exchanges on the village Google Group. Parishioners had been whipped into a frenzy believing that developers were eyeing up plots of land near where they lived. Some of these missives were instigated by

Charlotte/Gaby Bedford affiliated to the NPC and loosely being used as their communications person. There are numerous exchanges written by her from the NPC, including accusations that extremely well researched and measured information shared by us was 'Fake News'.

At the same time, knowing that assumptions can be very misleading we decided to ask for a meeting with the then Chair of the Parish Council (Michael Herbert). We believed that the NPC was a non-elected group under the Governance of the PC. We felt he might be able to call for public email exchanges to be respectful. (In the event he refused and the Vicar called for Parishioners to show respect for one another's views)

Michael agreed to meet with me and a friend and neighbour (Anne Brewer) who had been on the PC until a few weeks previously. Bear in mind that we have all lived in Warborough for thirty plus years and have known one another as neighbours in a perfectly civilised manner for that time. Michael had another Councillor with him who was leading on planning for the PC (Bill Oscroft). We sat around Michael's kitchen table to try and discuss how a group of residents/parishioners could have become so disenfranchised from what should have been an inclusive process. Michael was at great pains to explain that he knew nothing about the process for the NP. He referred several times with apparent pride to a 'Chinese Wall' between the PC and the NPC. He seemed oblivious to the fact that he and his fellow PC counsellors were responsible for the Governance of the NPC. Eventually he started talking about the FoI request and told me that he was trying to protect me. That I must understand that 'people' were very angry at my attempt to get information and that if my name should get released I could expect to 'get trolled'. I told him that this sounded like a threat. He said that it was nothing to do with him but that I should know how angry 'people' were with me.

The village had been orchestrated into a fear-driven community. Information with no counter balance exhorting people to support the NP or risk a large development near them. A regular reiteration of how hard the NPC was working for the 'good of the village'. No one was prepared to challenge them as they drove forward a systematic campaign describing their voluntary status, their tireless work and their inclusivity. Alongside this we were stigmatised as a troublesome minority putting the rest of the village at risk.

Following on from this parishioners closely associated with the NPC and living near one of the other sites saw fit to campaign outside the village school as children were arriving. Our daughter-in-law was asked to sign a petition in favour of building on the Six Acres and our grand-daughter came home from school worried that we were in danger. A sick community had emerged prepared to operate mirroring the poorest of behaviour even to its youngest members.

Helen Lewis

