

APPENDIX: CHAIR'S REVIEW OF 2016/17 AND THOUGHTS THE YEAR AHEAD

A year ago, almost to the day, Solihull Council officially confirmed that the KDBH Neighbourhood Area had been approved, and that the KDBH Forum was now a designated statutory planning body representing our three villages. This was a significant milestone in itself - it had taken six months hard work to establish appropriate governance and processes just to get us up and running as a Company and as a Forum. We were the first, and remain the only, Neighbourhood Forum in Solihull Borough; nationally, we are among the forerunners as a Neighbourhood Forum (most Neighbourhood Plans being undertaken by Parish or Town Councils, which our villages don't have).

THE CHALLENGES A YEAR AGO

A year ago, we were starting from scratch. We were a newly formed team with no funding, no web site, no Facebook, no marketing material. Nobody knew either who we were, or what a Neighbourhood Plan was.

It's fair to say that most of us did not fully realise the enormity of what we were taking on - or indeed how much time and effort it would require for:

- **an Area** covering more than 19,000 people. By comparison, a Parish Council Neighbourhood Plan typically covers a population of around 2,500- 5,000. In fact, the Area we cover in KDBH is closer to a Town Council;
- **Membership:** though we had more than the requisite number needed to apply to be a Forum (21), membership was a few tens of people.

So, our biggest challenge was, of course, just to 'get out there', get ourselves known and explain what Neighbourhood Planning is all about (in itself, not a straightforward concept). Which is why, throughout the whole of the last year, the team spent such an enormous amount of time and energy on communications and community involvement.

All of us have been on a steep learning curve (remembering most of us are near, or at, retirement!). We had to develop knowledge and skills in a whole host of areas, ranging from: new technology - the web, Facebook, digital mapping - to research and data analysis; PR and marketing; preparing and running a very large survey; planning regulation and policy development. The Forum is definitely the place to be if you want your stretch your 'grey matter'!

The huge amount of work preparing for our official Launch in mid November 2015 was well rewarded with a bigger than expected turnout. We'd barely had time to draw breath, however, when Solihull Council (SMBC) issued a paper outlining seven potential growth options for new development in the Borough. This signalled the start of SMBC's Local Plan Review consultation, focusing particularly on housing numbers, following successful legal challenge to SMBC's original Plan created in 2012/13.

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Three of the growth options mooted could affect KDBH, with one potentially seeing up to 1500 new homes developed in the Area - a massive 20% growth. Alongside the consultation, SMBC also issued a 'Call for Sites', requesting landowners or developers to submit sites for potential new development.

In one way, the consultation really helped us - by catching peoples' attention and providing a real, immediate context in which to explain how a Neighbourhood Forum / Plan can play a vital role in ensuring local people have more say on future development in their communities.

On the other hand, it also created a big challenge for us. We would need to react very quickly, and further concentrate our activities into an already tight timeframe, if we were to be ready for the next phase of SMBC Local Plan consultation. It was a challenge, too, in terms of the Forum's role and remit. Neighbourhood Plans must create local policies that are 'in general conformity' with the Local Authority's Development Plan. Linking KDBH Plans to SMBC's Local Plan development would inevitably draw us into far more detailed discussions on new housing options than we might have anticipated.

In all of this, we are very mindful that speed is 'of the essence', since it is only when a Neighbourhood Plan is 'made' - ie. passed a Referendum of local people - that it carries legal weight.

So, what have been the

HIGHLIGHTS

I want to pick out three things:

1. PEOPLE

- **The Forum Leadership** - Directors, Steering Committee, Focus Group Leads and their teams. There has been a remarkable level of continuity throughout the last year, reflecting a level of commitment and perseverance despite the, at times, huge demands being placed on their time (far in excess of what any of us signed up for). One Director (Membership Secretary) stood down in January because work commitments took him to Scotland; to be replaced immediately by another team member ready to step up to the challenge. My sincere thanks, and I am sure yours too, go to all the team who have worked so hard and sacrificed personal time to maintain a hugely ambitious pace of work. I am sorry that I twisted so many arms, but grateful that you all seem to have recovered (mostly)...
- **You, our Members**, now nearly 550 of you - and our wider network of supporters in the community. Highlights here being:
 - the 52+ volunteers who helped distribute leaflets for the recent Residents' Survey;
 - the nearly 3,000 residents who completed the Survey;
 - the over 400 people who attended our recent Developer Showcase
 - the many community groups who have invited us to speak to their members.

- **A whole host of local organisations** that together form such an essential part of our communications network and continue to help us spread the word:
 - our **resident associations** – who ‘gave birth to us’
 - **schools** - with a huge thank you to Arden Academy, in particular, for providing us with our Registered Offices, meeting facilities and support for printing
 - **churches** - with a special mention to St Philip’s and St James’ who acted as a collection point for Resident Surveys in Dorridge
 - **small local companies**, with a special mention to Vernon James who acted as collection point for our Residents’ survey in Bentley Heath
 - **larger companies**, including Sainsburys and Tescos who have allowed us to hand out leaflets and publicise events in the foyers of our local stores
 - **the press** - and particularly the Arden Observer, who have carried 3 or 4 articles about the Forum, including a big front page splash in May.

Working together, I am enormously proud of what we have achieved in reaching out to our community, as reflected in some key statistics:

- nearly 550 Members
- 367 Facebook ‘Likes’ - typically reaching our younger audience
- 33,975 web visits this year to date, and now typically averaging over 2,500 hits / month, peaking in June when we had 7807 hits (many of whom completing our Residents Survey).

Thank you, everyone, for your support - it is what keeps us going when things gets tough.

2. EVENTS

Each of our major events requires a huge amount of preparation - from PR and publicity through to leaflet and poster design and production, printing, distribution etc. Equally, afterwards to review, analyse and document the output. All of this must be done robustly, as it forms our required ‘evidence base’ that will be reviewed by an Independent Examiner. Notable events include:

- Our Launch last November - achieved within a month of official designation
- In January 2016, community consultation on SMBC’s Local Plan Growth Options
- April’s two Visioning sessions
- The Residents’ Survey in May/June
- The Developer Showcase in July. We had to pull out all the stops to run this event before the summer break, having only received all the information from SMBC in June. This event was notable as our first real opportunity to work with Developers, and we appreciated their support
- Attending most major local community events - at Christmas, Fun Runs, Dorridge Day etc, as well as speaking to a wide range of community groups.

Not forgetting, of course, our regular monthly Open Forum meetings, Steering Committee meetings, Focus Group meetings, updates with SMBC. There’s never a dull moment, that’s for sure!

3. OUTPUTS

A glance at the documents page of our website shows the large range of material we have produced, all of it aimed at making the local planning process more transparent and enabling our community to make better informed decisions on future development in KDBH.

We are at pains to ensure the accuracy and quality of these outputs - mindful that many of them will form part of our 'evidence base' on which we will build policy for the Neighbourhood Plan.

At the speed we are moving, it has often been a challenge to get everything done as quickly as we would want and like. In some areas, we are still catching up - for example we have not yet loaded onto our website all the material provided by developers for the Developer Showcase. Please bear with us. On a daily basis, we are responding to an increasing amount of communication from Residents, Developers and external bodies - relating, for example, to planning applications (eg. the Earlswood Planning Application, the Motorway Services Area) and other consultations (eg. 'Save Our Parks').

GOING FORWARD

Building on our successes, the year ahead will, I think, hold different but equally demanding challenges. We have now arrived at the heart of what the Forum is all about - creating a Neighbourhood Plan with policies that define the needs and requirements for new development in our Area, linking in with the new Solihull Local Plan wherever appropriate. We have already started work on our Plan, looking at Vision, Issues, Objectives and draft policies.

Recognising the change of emphasis over the coming year, we have recently reviewed our Governance so that we continue to operate most effectively. This includes renewing 'Conflict of Interest Declarations' for all Directors, Steering Committee and Planning Team members. The leadership of the LL&CF team has changed to remove any perceived risk of conflict of interest. We are extremely fortunate to now have not one but two retired Planners on our team. We are acquiring additional help in specialist areas through our central Government Grant funding. We have a rock solid evidence base from the Residents Survey Feedback, the Developer Showcase, and the many other events that have yielded feedback.

Solihull's Draft Local Plan will shortly come out to consultation. There are proposals in the offing to build a new Motorway Service Area on 'our' side of Junction 4, affecting Gate Lane. And I am sure that the coming year holds other unknowns that we will need to address and adapt to.

Our big challenge now is managing and facilitating what will undoubtedly be some potentially quite heated debates over the coming months on future developments in our Area. As a Forum, I believe that we would be ducking our duty if we failed to provide an effective channel for Residents' views to be heard on these matters. Providing a Forum in which Residents, the Council and Developers can come together to debate, armed with accurate information on which to make informed discussions that deliver the best outcomes possible for our villages.

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I count myself privileged to have led the team, and represented KDBH, over the past 18 months. Family and other commitments mean that, for the foreseeable future, I will not be able to give the huge amount of time that the Chair's role has required thus far (virtually full time from April to July). Ian Fisher, our Membership Secretary, has offered to step up to Vice Chair over the next few months, at least, so you will be seeing a lot more of him. I am very grateful to Ian, especially as he has a full time job.

We live and breathe by you, our Membership. Thank you for your support, and please keep this coming. It makes a huge difference. Please also help us in our never-ending quest to spread the word and make sure that as many people as possible at least know we are here, what we do, and how it benefits them.

Finally, please would you join with me in showing your appreciation for the KDBH Forum team – all unpaid volunteers - who have given so much to get us this far.