

I am writing on behalf of Shotley Parish Council following the decision of the Babergh District Council Development Committee made at their meeting held in Shotley Village Hall on the 8 June 2005.

As you are no doubt aware we are very disappointed with the decision that has been made, not only the decision on the day but also with the consultation process followed by the District Council which we believe undermines your claim to be a Council working in partnership with the local community.

We would like to make the following points, without prejudice to any future appeal or review of the Development Committee's decision, and would welcome the opportunity to discuss these issues and receive the assurances we are seeking at your earliest convenience.

1. In his address to the Committee Philip Roberts speaking for the applicant said that negotiations on this application had commenced two years prior to the submission of the application. Shotley Parish Council has made known its concerns over the site and the aspirations of the community for many years. The results of community consultations by the Shotley Youth and Community Project and the HMS Ganges Association were made available to the Council and most recently we proposed a variation to the draft development plan. Given that our interests and concerns were known to the Council why were we not directly involved in the two years prior to the application being submitted? Was the developer at anytime in those two years advised to open a dialogue with the local community?

2. Further into his address Mr. Roberts stated that having reduced the size of the development he believed he had a "done deal" and was therefore surprised to see that Officers were recommending rejection. If true this is a serious allegation of misconduct against one or more of your officers, if false a gross libel has been made. What steps have been taken to get Mr. Roberts to justify or withdraw this statement?

3 Within the restraints of our very limited resources we have tried to take an active part in and influence initiatives such as the Strategic Partnership, the Crime and Disorder Reduction Panel and the Haven Partnership. We were pleased with the progress we were making in getting Shotley's needs and concerns raised. However, we question Babergh's commitment to partnership. If one purpose of these initiatives is to inform the development of policy then this point seems to have been lost on the majority of Councillors members of the Development Committee. During the formal discussion and following the meeting the majority seemed to be totally unaware of the needs and aspirations of this community notwithstanding the fact that they had been addressed in the report submitted by your Head of Planning (Control).

4 We are concerned over the internal consultation processes within Babergh. For example, late last year we were asked by the Babergh East Local Strategic Partnership (BELSP) to provide them with further information on the case for the provision of sport and youth facilities in the village. This was done and submitted to both the BELSP and the Planning Department. We were lead to believe that there would be discussion between the consultant engaged to advise on the s106 agreements and staff in Leisure and Community Services. At a meeting in April 2005 attended by staff from Leisure and Community Services we were advised that no internal consultation had taken place nor had they been asked by the Planning Department to comment in general terms on how the needs of Shotley could be met through s106 agreements. In addition they had not been asked to provide an assessment of the community facilities elements of the applicant's Master Plan.

5 In the beginning we were heartened by the recruitment of the consultant referred to above as we were informed that he would act with us to present a solid case covering our needs and assist us in determining if the submissions we had previously made were realistic. We have not as yet had any explanation as to why we were not allowed to meet with him nor why we were not provided with a copy of his terms of reference.

6 In general terms the quality of the consultation process we believe leaves a great deal to be desired and should be urgently reviewed. We recognize that it is difficult to balance the application of planning law with ensuring that the needs of the community are met. However, we received no offers of help from officers in regard to formulating our response, no feedback on the responses we submitted and no invitations to stakeholder meetings. Meetings with the planning officers were essentially briefings and attempts at dialogue were unproductive.

I now turn to the Development Committee meeting itself. We are of course grateful for the decision to hold the meeting in Shotley and for the changes you made to enable more people more time to address the committee. The day itself was professionally managed.

We have expressed our general concern about Councillors' poor grasp of the issues and how this was reflected in their speeches. Collectively they forgot that they were discussing a planning application for development at Shotley.

There were three types of intervention made by a number of Councillors that warranted the intervention of the Chair and of the District Solicitor.

Firstly, Councillors referred to hearsay and gossip as a contributing factor in coming to their personal position.

Secondly, Councillors referred to the needs of their own particular constituencies. Thirdly, they speculated about future applications that may be made for the site. Contributions such as these made up the great majority of the debate. One Councillor made reference to the need to avoid an appeal by the applicant.

We believe that this decision has not been made on material planning grounds and has seriously undermined this community's faith in Babergh District Council's ability to act as a rational and representative body.

The minutes of the meeting are in our view inadequate on two counts;

Firstly, they do not summarise the content of the debate.

Secondly, they do not provide a full note as to why Councillors chose to ignore the advice of officers as required by your constitution.

Finally, we have since received an invitation from the Head of Planning (Control) to enter into further discussions about the s106 agreements application to this development. Shotley Parish Council remains committed to doing the best for its Parishioners and to working in partnership with those that share its aims. However, it has to be a partnership of equals based on a recognition that we are limited in the resources we can call upon. It would go some way toward re-establishing our confidence if you could agree that Shotley Parish Council is copied in to all future correspondence and that we are invited to all future meetings of stakeholders. We would also like to discuss how we can make best use of the expertise of officers at Babergh and Suffolk County Council following the assurances made at the Suffolk County Council Executive meeting that County officer time and expertise would be made available to maximize the sustainability of this development.

We understand that the decision made by your Committee in respect of this application is being referred to the Secretary of State. We can only hope that the error made in approving it can be rectified. If this does not happen the Parish Council, on behalf of its parishioners, will continue to work vigorously to obtain proper compensation for the community.

John Mullan  
Chairman - Shotley Parish Council