

Respondent Ref No 526

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In my role as chairman of Green Squeeze, a politically neutral local environmental group of some 797 members, I wish to make a written Statement relating to The Erewash Core Strategy Review Examination – December 2023/January 2024

Contents of this statement are as follows:-

The effectiveness and inclusivity of the consultation process and the way it was conducted in the shadow of the Covid pandemic.

The voting process at EBC's planning meeting early in 2022 when the full council voted unanimously to adopt the core strategy document and by default agreed to the green belt being used to build approximately 1,300 houses, plus what EBC describe as a relief road.

I understand that both of these can be dealt with under Duty to Cooperate matters 1 and 2.

To whom it may concern

Over the past 15 - 20 years unfortunately Erewash Borough Council have disenfranchised residents from the consultation/decision making process on matters important to them and their communities. While this may not be wholly intentional the council shows little awareness or concern of the frustration and exclusion felt by a great number of residents.

In my experience both as the founder and chairman of Green Squeeze, and from my time serving on several parish councils, the majority of residents have no confidence that the council will listen or to take on board their views and concerns, particularly relating to development in the Borough and its effect on the environment. This view also seems to be shared by many parish councils I have come into contact with, although understandably they are less likely to state this publically.

The result has been to create an overwhelming atmosphere of apathy and resentment amongst local people when it comes to engaging with the council in consultations such as planning and the core strategy document. Should you wish to validate this take a moment to approach anyone on the street in Long Eaton, Ilkeston or Kirk Hallam and ask for their views on the council's willingness to listen to the public and act on their concerns.

The perception is that the former controlling group (prior to May 2023) were more concerned to about following the party line from Westminster than listening to the wishes and concerns of local residents. An unfortunate situation that ultimately undermines the perception of local democracy.

Common phrases used by residents and parish councils that I hear time and time again include:

It's already a done deal

No one is listening to us

Why bother

It's just a box ticking exercise

They're only in it for themselves

What's the point, it won't make any difference

Even though such statements may not be entirely true, that is the perception of many if not most residents and that alone has done and continues to do untold damage. It results in a downward spiral that over time constantly erodes public confidence to the point where it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In the consultation process part of the problem lays in the council's inability or unwillingness to communicate in plain English. Every specialised field has it's own 'language' and the council's inability to break free of 'planning speak' and engage with residents using a language they understand is a major obstacle.

This unintentional semantic intimidation plus the fact that many residents view the council as a symbol of authority rather than being their representative, creates an entity that people feel challenged by and are subsequently fearful of engaging with.

When the council recently refused planning for 192 houses in Stanton-by-Dale, unwisely the applicant extracted the addresses of all the objectors and wrote to them individually. Even though this was nothing to do with the council, dozens of residents – particularly the elderly - were extremely distressed when they received 'official letters' referring to their role in the refusal of the application and requesting more information about the nature of the resident's objection. Such was the level of concern that the council had to quickly revise the way it handled information relating to those objecting to planning applications. Again this was no reflection on the council but it does demonstrate people's fear of interaction with 'the local authority'.

Kirk Hallam is a relatively deprived area of some 6,000 people and despite a strong desire to protect 'their' green belt few if any residents took part in the core strategy consultation process.

I believe this is probably because they were wary, or in extreme cases frightened of doing so. Again residents are confused by the councils language or simply do not understand it.

Of course the council can boast an entire list of access points to the consultation process including drop-in sessions for face-to-face discussions, but do they really use a language that residents can readily understand?

As I have stated previously every industry has it's own 'language' and it's the council's inability to move away from that and communicate with residents in plain English that causes a disconnection. For example while the words Core Strategy may be second nature to councilors and planning officers, what does a frail eighty-five year old lady living alone in Kirk Hallam make of such an obscure stand alone title?

As an example questions posed by this review include:

- Is there an alternative to using the government's standard methodology?
- Are the conclusions of the sustainability appraisal correct?

Despite being the leader of an environmental group since 2008 and a parish councilor since 1970 I have no idea what those questions really mean? What is the government's standard methodology? I suspect it would require someone with a qualification in planning to answer that in a meaningful way and it would certainly be beyond anyone you're likely to encounter on Ilkeston's Bath Street.

Meanwhile sustainability is a buzz-word that has peppered council documents for the past two decades, remarkable in that almost no one knows what it means and like the story of the kings magic suit no one dare ask.

In addition both questions require ordinary members of the public to offer an opinion capable of challenging government experts with years of planning experience. This clearly will never happen.

The eighty five year old lady living alone in Kirk Hallam I just mentioned will have an opinion on the fate of the green belt, probably the fields where she played as a child. But this will be an emotional one perhaps formed having seen the appalling conditions workers at Stanton Ironworks were exposed to and how thousands of workers used the countryside to gain a brief respite from long hours in the foundry. More likely than not she will have first seen those fields as a child on walks with family members as they sought respite from the heat and dirt of the Stanton works. The point I am making is that hers will be an emotional response rather than technical. So is her opinion any less valid because she cannot question the government's standard methodology or

converse using planning speak, or pepper her response with words like sustainable? I suggest that the current consultation process is unintentionally biased against older and less articulate people who feel intimidated by the process.

While few Kirk Hallam residents initially responded to the council's consultation process over 3,000 responded as a result of Green Squeeze circulating the same document to the residents of Kirk Hallam. The difference was that someone from the community took the time to engage with residents to explain its content in a way they understood.

The deputy leader of the former controlling party cruelly joked that the council should have paid Green Squeeze for our assistance in the consultation process. It was a joke in poor taste but it did contain more than an element of truth.

As a result of our efforts, of the 3,000 that eventually responded to the consultation document, we should wonder why only four of us are speaking at this review? As stated previously I suggest it is because many feel intimidated by a process that appears quasi legal, overly formal and the exclusive domain of planners and developers.

The council's consultation period ran from the 27th of January until the 20th of July 2020. As you will be aware this had been extended to compensate for the effect of restrictions around Covid infections.

The long term psychological effect of lockdown and living with the constant threat to our own mortality as well as loved ones, friends and neighbours is only now (November 2023) beginning to be understood. Quickly switching the consultation process on and off depending on government lockdown restrictions was a hurried ill-considered exercise to meet the council's deadline - a very crude yardstick that did not take into account the mental state of the community. Specifically it did not take into account people's state of mind when asking them to engage with a consultation process that at the time was in the shadow of the biggest threat to life and health in living memory. By comparison a 'council consultation' must have seemed wholly irrelevant, trivial and unnecessarily intrusive.

In cognitive terms this is often described an override factor, something that compels us to ignore all other issues in favour of one exceptionally pressing need. To day for example that could be one of us suffering a migraine attack or excruciating toothache.

As an example, although the parish council in my own village of Dale Abbey were informed of the core strategy consultation, at no stage did they engage with it, and I suspect for the reasons I have just suggested.

During EBC's Core Strategy consultation -27th January to 20th of July 2020 - the media and the general public were understandably fixated on daily updates regarding the number of people in England and Wales that had died – often in

the most appalling circumstances. In total this amounted to 51,831 people (ONS figure) during the period in question, a huge number that again would have seen a consultation on council planning issues as being totally irrelevant by comparison.

The daily news that the public were exposed to during the period spanning the actual consultation was almost as foreboding as during total lockdown. While certain freedoms were restored they did little to distract the nation from the constant threat to their health and wellbeing.

- In April 2020 according to government figures (ONS) 85.2% of the population said they were either worried or very worried about the effect of Covid on their lives.
- At the end of April 50.2% said their well-being was affected by Covid or the fear of Covid.
- In early May 2020 people were still only permitted to leave home for outdoor recreation.
- On 1 June, people were still required to be home overnight, and only permitted to meet outside in groups of up to six people.
- In early July it was announced that the peak of the current wave of Covid infection was not expected before mid-August and could lead to between 1,000 and 2,000 hospital admissions per day, according to government scientists.

The point I am seeking to make is that this was a wholly inappropriate time to be undertaking the legally required process of consulting with residents. Yes, there were those that responded but the vast majority of the borough did not.

Only 1% of respondents mentioned land south of Kirk Hallam and a large proportion of those were statutory consultees.

In addition to the effects of Covid on the mental health of residents, the lockdown hugely impacted on the efforts of our Green Squeeze group to engage with the community. Unlike the council we had no facilities, no funds, no opportunity to hold face-to-face meetings with groups of residents and due to lockdown, no prospect of holding fund raising activities.

In April 2021 and in a desperate attempt to bring our concerns to the attention of EBC we funded an online petition that we subsequently presented to a full council meeting in July of that year. Lack of funds meant we were prevented from promoting the petition anywhere near as heavily as we would have wished, nevertheless it did attract 1,701 signatures and more importantly bought us the opportunity to address the full council.

Interestingly in the earlier days the petition achieved a substantial international response, a fact that informally some councilors used to trivialise the response. 'It's mainly foreigners was a typical argument'.

The petition may be viewed online by visiting:

<https://www.gopetition.com/signatures/say-no-building-in-the-erewash-green-belt.html>

In spring 2022 I sat in the public gallery at Long Eaton Town Hall and watched every single member of the controlling party grudgingly, unquestionably, vote in favor of building in the green belt, a decision that I know some members (and I suspect many others) did not agree with. Therefore the vote was flawed and reflected the views of neither councilors nor the thousands of residents they were representing.

This pressure was normalised by describing it as 'voting along party lines'. The result of course is that the views and wishes of the public are sacrificed for the sake of political gain something that makes a mockery of public consultation claims. This is a farcical situation that denies residents their right of fair representation and ultimately undermines the democratic process.

In contrast in late October 2023 I conducted a straw poll amongst residents of Dale Abbey (Kirk Hallam is part of Dale Abbey civil parish) and not one single resident was in favour of the council's proposals, this included our borough representative who at the planning meeting had been 'pressured' to voting in favor of housing development in the green belt.

Combine this with the fact that the parish council, for the reasons mentioned earlier did not engage with the consultation process means that not only were the genuine views of Dale Abbey residents not represented, they were actually misrepresented and without their knowledge. A situation I know continues to this day.

Stating the obvious this means that a development of 1,300 houses was apportioned to a village (ward) of just 92 people who had no representation at borough level or a say in the consultation process a situation that must be unprecedented in local government. Furthermore the parish council having lately become aware of this review applied to take part but were prevented from doing so because they had not ticked the appropriate box eighteen months previously. The pandemic created exceptional circumstances but not exceptional enough to be reflected in the council's consultation process. In light of the events I have mentioned maybe this should be referred to as the councils lack of consultation process.

As you will be aware the extraordinary meeting of the council scheduled for Thursday November 30 had to be adjourned in order for the council to take legal advice. This was precipitated by a letter from Lee Rowley MP minister of state

for housing planning and building safety to Mr James Dawson leader of the council (see attached).

The letter invoked archaic legislation and was clearly designed to bully, intimidate and coerce the council into taking a course of action that neither they nor the public present were in favor of. It also deprived the public their right to witness a democratic resolution of their concerns.

The fact that Mr Rowley waited until just three hours before the scheduled start of the meeting to send his letter suggests a further attempt to deliberately disrupt the work of the council and the democratic process.

The letter was quickly followed by a statement from Maggie Throup the Erewash MP that caused further confusion, something that suggests a carefully orchestrated attempt by central government to impose its will over the wishes of the council and deny thousands of Erewash people the right to have issues decided by the democratic process

Speaking to members of the public this episode alone has compromised the impartiality of core strategy review.

If these actions were allowed to go unchallenged it would negate the need for borough councils, planning regulations, the wishes of electorate and ultimately the entire democratic process that our country holds so dear. Instead it would be replaced by a Putin style democracy in a dystopian society.

Green Squeeze are a political neutral organization. In our opinion this latest outrage has destroyed whatever small amount of trust and faith Erewash residents had in either the government or the local council. Against that background I suggest that the decision on the future of the Erewash green belt cannot reliably entrusted to the government or the local council and instead should be settled by the people in a local referendum. Something that would be wholly transparent and cost a fraction of a new or revised core strategy process.

Only then would faith in the council begin to be restored, the complete process would take very many years and involve the council completely rethinking its consultation and communication process in order for it to be fit for purpose in the 21st century.

Yours sincerely.

Paul Harvey
Chairman of Green Squeeze

Attached
[Letter from Lee Rowley MP](#)