



Extraordinary Meeting Minutes

Meeting of Mattishall Parish Council

Tuesday 22 September 2020 at 7pm,
via Video Conferencing

Parish Councillors present: Mike Nunn, Graham Clarke, Richard Turner, David Piper, Janice Smith and David Fowler. Also in attendance: Lorraine Trueman (Parish Clerk), Ian Martin (District Councillor) and 3 members of the public.

Cllr Nunn opened the meeting at 7.04pm and welcomed everyone.

1. To receive apologies for absence

Apologies were received and accepted from Cllr Norton. Cllr Nunn advised Cllr Turner would be joining approximately 15 minutes late due to other commitments.

2. To receive declarations of interest in items on the agenda and consider any requests for dispensations

None were received.

3. Open forum for Public Participation: an opportunity to hear from members of the public regarding matters on the agenda for discussion

District Councillor, Ian Martin, paid tribute to Mattishall Parish Council for holding an extraordinary meeting to focus on this subject.

The government decided to launch, at the beginning of August, 2 major consultations on the planning process. (There is also local government reform going on in the background and devolution proposals that are having to be worked through, so District Councils have a lot on.)

The 2 papers are

- i) the White Paper – planning for the future. It is very broad in the way it is written and has been described as reading like a Green Paper as there is so little precision within the document. You could see settlement boundaries, allocated sites very much in a similar vein as we have at the moment.

- ii) the changes in the current planning system, it has an algorithm, which sets out instead of 612 dwellings p.a. Breckland is required to do 1,070 p.a. for the next 10 years. That is 11,000 homes or a 75% increase.

There are 3 zones that are outlined in the White Paper, growth, renewal and protected. If you are going to build that number of houses, Breckland will have to try to draw the lines such that protected will be incredibly tight and the rest of the area will be renewal and growth.

The moment you read renewal and growth, then if planning applications come forward which comply with the local design code, which is part of what the local plan would have, then there is Permission in Principle for them to proceed. There is no input at that stage from local residents, councillors, parish councils.

The only input is at the earlier local plan development stage which is restricted, in Breckland's case, to 42 months. There is only 1 consultation stage with the public and that is going to reportedly give us "world class civic accountability".

It is incredibly important that we push back and make the case. You can imagine the backlash, when we put through a local plan which is when people are supposed to be consulted and then building takes place in the field next door for 50 houses and nobody, including the Parish Council has any say in it. The backlash from local residents is going to be understandable but huge.

They appear to be targeting rural communities and conservative seats across the whole of the south of England. In Norfolk, Norwich, Kings Lynn and Great Yarmouth with either static or reduced targets.

Breckland have already sent 2 letters.

One initially, because they are starting a local plan review, asking for clarification where that stands ahead of the implication of the White Paper (if it is implemented). The second letter has gone in with the headline issues, 1070 homes in this area is not deliverable, the infrastructure is not there, the residents are not going to stand for it and as a consequence Breckland will be submitting a detailed push back.

The drafting is being finalised on the submissions and is likely to come up at the council meeting on Thursday morning which you can watch via YouTube.

There is sufficient concern to push back, George Freeman is supporting the push back and is working with MP's to see if they can get things changed.

7.12pm Cllr Smith joined

Cllr Nunn explained that there are 2 consultations.

- i) changes to the current planning system whereby consultation closes 1 October and is therefore the most pressing for the Parish Council to make a statement about
- ii) the White Paper – planning for the future closes on 29 October. The aim of the meeting is to focus on the "changes to the planning system".

Cllr Nunn urged everyone to visit the government website and have their own say by completing an online survey. He explained that this was a 40-page consultation document, but it was in a question and answer format and that everyone was entitled to have their say. There is also a provision for Parish Councils, District Councils, developers, small builders, anybody to forward a written statement.

The White Paper – planning for the future, due to close 29 October, is a more substantial document but does not contain much detail. It does give you a much better insight to what government is planning. It divides sections into 3 pillars but try not to get drawn into this one as we have another month to discuss although the 2 are clearly linked. If possible, try to focus on the first one, changes to the planning policy and regulations.

Dist. Cllr Martin added, within the changes to the current planning system there is the algorithm. It is important to the White Paper as that is the starting point for the numbers allocated but the algorithm is in the 1st paper, the changes to the current planning system.

Regards affordable homes, there are 2 elements, delivering first homes, which takes a chunk of the affordable homes commitment and says they will be discounted homes for first time buyers with possible priorities for key workers. There is no detail on how that is to be implemented other than it effectively replaces the shared ownership element of affordable homes. Given that shared ownership is a preferred way of doing things to introduce something that is untested to replace it is a real concern.

One of the immediate concerns, is that the only mention of COVID in these 2 papers is in the changes document because of the concern to support small and medium enterprise builders. To do that they are proposing to raise the Section 106 threshold from 10 dwellings to 40 or 50 for 18 months but once this is in it will be difficult to pull back from. In Breckland most developments are for 50 or less dwellings.

As a consequence, all the items proposed in the changes to the current planning system could be implemented by statutory instrument or just a ministerial statement and the section 106 would only require a ministerial statement. And they are proposing to do that, this autumn.

If this goes through you can say goodbye to affordable homes being delivered on local developments for the next 1.5+ years.

When the local plan was put together the evidence provided said we needed 38.5% of the new homes to be affordable. Breckland was delivering 22% and the policy was set at 25%. Developers who have moved from 40% down to 25% will now want to move down to 0%.

7.21pm Cllr Turner joins.

Cllr Nunn explained the approach to the meeting, whereby he wanted a free flow of discussion in an extremely complex area. He explained that he had considered going through the changes to the planning system questionnaire but decided against it as this is something that can be done offline, corporately or by individuals.

Cllr Clarke asked if we are resolved to send a letter in commenting on the White Paper. He explained he attended a meeting last week where Parishes were being encouraged to respond.

Cllr Nunn confirmed that was the case.

Cllr Clarke proposed we took this in 3 elements, a comment on the algorithm, then affordable homes and how SME's (small to medium enterprises) are likely to fit into this and how that is going to effect the infrastructure if there is no section 106 compelling the builder to contribute towards. It's alright building numerous homes and not having to put affordable homes in but if there is no infrastructure (no schools, doctors, etc) where do all these people go? Can the bus network transport them all to schools, doctors, pharmacies further afield?

Cllr Nunn questioned that if the section 106 is replaced with the proposed infrastructure levy how would the councils gain assurance this will provide all of the infrastructure required? Other areas use CIL (community infrastructure levy) which also seems to work well enough now and so would question the need to replace with the infrastructure levy.

A member of the public spoke and advised they wanted to find out more. Although they had heard of the White Paper, they had not given it much time until they learnt of this evenings meeting. They pointed out how shocked and horrified they were that this was going on and had not heard much about it. They understood that this affects all of us and asked how the public could get involved and what involvement can they have. They also asked why it is not more widely known about.

Cllr Nunn responded by saying he did not know why this was not widely in the public domain but the public can get involved by completing the online survey , already mentioned, for the changes to the planning system by the deadline of 1 October.

A member of the public confirmed they would do this but was concerned that most of the parish would not know about this.

Cllr Fowler spoke and reminded everyone that there are 2 papers and the one we should focus on now is the changes to the planning system.

The changes to the planning system is a public consultation and everybody in the country can respond to it. He then drew attention to 2 documents that had been shared with the council,

- i) a power point presentation by Breckland that Dist. Cllr. Martin had shared. This document summarised the key points around the number of dwellings from 612 to 1,070. There would be no cap on these numbers meaning developers could come forward with a lot more. It is not clear how the algorithm has been constructed. There has been very little mention of COVID and BREXIT and the impact these will have on the economy. Normally you would see a double approach, if you talk about increasing housing numbers you would look for how economic development is going to support those increase in numbers. Breckland have pointed out there is nothing included in the documents. Where are all these people going to work? This is particularly

- relevant in this area where this is primarily a low wage economy. Breckland has a large number of planning approvals that have not been developed out. The impact of infrastructure requirements and who is going to pay for that.
- ii) a document from CPRE (Campaign to Protect Rural England) Norfolk, they have gone through each question and set out a response. Having read it and listened to what has been said so far, I think it is a really good response. He suggested that the Parish Council response would have more weight if they responded to each question and we could use the CPRE response as a template to our response or we lend our support to it with any required tweaks. It is relevant for Norfolk and it seems to address all those issues mentioned so far.

Cllr Nunn confirmed he agreed with the usefulness of the CPRE document and said that coupled with the power point from Breckland there should be enough details to enable the Parish Council to respond to the 1st paper.

Cllr Clarke agreed with the approach of taking the CPRE document as a starting point for the Parish Council's response to the changes in the planning system.

A member of the public spoke to raise concerns over the speed that this is being done. Understanding that the government wants to implement this in the autumn of this year and the deadline for comments being 1 October, how can any analysis of the comments be carried out? They wonder if this is just lip service. They feel it is a disgraceful way of running things and does not believe it is democratic.

Cllr Nunn agreed with the member of public that this is coming in very quickly with little input from the public. He expressed his personal opinion that the current planning system is broke for individual householders, small builders, developers, Parish Councils, District Councils.

A member of the public emphasised that the point being made was that due to the speed this was being implemented the government could not take into account the comments being made.

Cllr Nunn confirmed the Parish Council were in agreement about the speed at which this was happening.

Cllr Piper confirmed he agreed with taking the approach of using the CPRE document as a starting point. The changes to the current planning system consultation was launched on 6 August with a deadline of 1 October and although we cannot change this we should precis input by saying this is a very short consultation period and implementation immediately after that. They are trying to rush this through quickly. I think we should make that point. He said he knew about this because he is on the Parish Council but was concerned how widely this had been published.

Dist. Cllr Martin explained that for some reason it hasn't caught fire. There have been the odd articles in the press. There was a letter in The Times from the chair of Cley Parish Council asking why this is not widely known but nobody responded.

Cllr Piper pointed out that people are focussing on COVID.

Dist. Cllr Martin suggested this could be put on Mattishall Matters Facebook page with the links. He also asked that any comments made by the public or Parish Council be copied to George Freeman. Between us all we can give George Freeman the evidence to use and your points, in particular about the speed at which this is being done, that it isn't democratic and it appears to be paying lip service to consultation.

The algorithm is based on there being no compulsion on developers to build on permissions that have already been granted. The government assumes the more permissions granted the more properties are going to be built and prices will come down. If there is no incentive for a developer to build out all their permitted dwellings, then they will bring them to the market when the price is right to sell.

There are 3,500 – 4,000 permitted dwellings in Breckland, 30,000 in Greater Norwich, over 1 million across England. These papers come forward without any incentive or threat to developers to build out the properties they have permission for. The numbers are so big they cannot be delivered and the threat in the White Paper is that if the affordability test is failed then central government will take control. It is setting us up to fail and it is not going to deliver housing.

The basic flaw is that if you build more houses the prices will come down. The second flaw is the affordability test/ which is calculated based on workplace salaries v the average cost of local houses.

In Breckland, we have a low wage economy, but we also have a significant proportion of residents who commute outside of the district (Norwich, Peterborough, Ely, Cambridge, London). Those salaries are not considered in this calculation. So, you have houses prices that are driven by what people earn, but the calculation only looks at the salary of those that work in Breckland.

Cllr Clarke spoke to re-enforce the comments from Dist. Cllr Martin and added what we need is to incentivise the builders to release their permissions and these vast land banks they have. The only way you are going to do that with a builder is to make it financially punitive if they hang onto the land.

He suggested that the Parish Council should put something in their response that says the issues of build out have not been tackled and that is a fundamental part of the problem. He went on to give the following example, if a builder has permission to build a number of houses on a plot of land then within 1 year that builder should have started. If the builder hasn't started in earnest within one year, then that builder should be fined a proportion of the overall profit they expect to receive from it. It becomes more punitive the more that time goes on. That way we will get these permissions released and we would stop encroaching on the green belt and other valuable arable land that we are going to need in the future.

A member of the public spoke to agree that land banking was a problem but wondered if penalising them on profit is the way to go as they could find a way to hide profit.

Cllr Fowler pointed out that the consultation document puts the blame of the lack of house building on local authorities but does not consider the 3,000+ permissions already granted by Breckland that have not been built out. If there is not a question

in the survey on this the Parish Council need to add that point in the precis of the response.

Dist. Cllr Martin told the meeting that George Freeman has been promoting the idea of a development levy. This is, when permission is granted there is an uplift in the value of the land, and a percentage is charged to the developer.

George Freeman had not been getting any support for this, but some bank benchers are beginning to warm to the idea. You could consider including this as an idea in your covering letter as a positive solution.

Cllr Nunn asks who else would like to speak and let the public know they are welcome to stay until the close of the meeting.

A member of the public spoke to confirm they were happy to post something out to the wider public as suggested by Dist. Cllr Martin but was concerned that they knew little about the subject.

Cllr Nunn suggested that the clerk send out the Breckland power point, the CPRE Norfolk document with suggested responses to the survey and a link to the survey.

A member of the public spoke to clarify that the subject was complex, and it might not be possible for some members of the public for be able to complete the 40-page online survey. They wondered if it would be an option for these people to contact George Freeman to raise their concerns.

Cllr Nunn confirmed this would be possible and Dist. Cllr Martin suggested submitting a statement directly to The Ministry of Housing Community and Local Government and copy to George Freeman so that he knows the weight of interest that is starting to build.

A member of the public asked if this was a Conservative party initiative and what the other parties thought of it.

Dist. Cllr Martin confirmed it was led by the Conservative Party and advised that Breckland are making the same points as opposition parties. Most parties have a united front, along with George Freeman who is part of a group of approx. 60 government back benchers who are trying to kill the algorithm. It now needs public support.

The members of the public thanked the councillors for making them aware of this matter and involving them and left the meeting at 7.57pm

- 4. To discuss and agree comments to be put forward on behalf of MPC on the Government consultation document entitled “changes to the current planning system” launched by the Ministry of Housing, communities and Local Government. This consultation closes on 1 October 2020.**

Cllr Nunn noted that there was a consensus of an idea of what will form the Parish Council response. It is just how that is pulled together. It will take 2 or 3 drafts to get near it and we are not over endowed in time.

Cllr Fowler suggested that the councillors individually take the CPRE response to each question and say yes, no or amend to make more relevant to Mattishall.

Dist. Cllr Martin highlighted the need for the covering letter, which doesn't need to be long.

Cllr Clarke offered to make a start on the letter and share amongst the other councillors. He thought the letter say that 6 weeks consultation period on something as important as this is ludicrous and the issue of failing to address the permissions that already exist and that should be tackled as a priority. He also highlighted that the meeting had not addressed the brown site first principle.

Dist. Cllr Martin stated that the current local plan has nothing to say about brown field sites.

The councillors discussed the building out on brown field sites before using agricultural land. It is mentioned in the White Paper but there is no substance about how it will be delivered.

Cllr Fowler advised that every local authority published a brown field register so the government will know how many dwellings can be constructed on brown field sites.

The council unanimously agreed to take the approach of using the CPRE response.

Cllr Nunn spoke about the need for the covering letter to be punchy and short, although this may take a few drafts to get the right result. He recommended the use of bullet points as the reader will have limited time to read the correspondence.

It was agreed that Cllr Clarke would draw up the first draft of the letter and Cllr Fowler would prepare the Parish Council's answers to the online survey for the changes in the planning system.

Cllr Fowler proposed that after all thoughts on the covering letter and online survey where circulated that Cllr Nunn would have final sign off on behalf of the Parish Council. Cllr Nunn confirmed that the final consensus would be overseen by both himself and the clerk. Cllr Piper seconded the proposal and all other councillors agreed. Cllr Nunn agreed that the final output would be reported back at the next full council meeting.

In the summing up of the meeting Cllr Nunn said it had been productive and useful and he was pleased that members of the public had joined to become involved in the issue.

Meeting close 8.25pm