

**The views expressed in the following report are those of the author. The OCRA Committee have not had an opportunity to consider it so currently have no view on this matter.**

### **Localism in Cambridge**

I have been a regular attendee of North Area Committee meetings since Old Chesterton Residents' Association (OCRA) took a decision to ensure that it had a representative at each meeting to reflect OCRA's views and opinions. This paper draws on that experience and aims to map a way forward that I think will fulfil the City Council's objective of encouraging greater involvement of local communities more effectively.

The North Area Committee is being used to pilot the City Council's approach to Localism in Cambridge. In my view it is failing in its object by trying to do too many disparate things with a structure that is not appropriate.

### **North Area Committee**

The committee can be an effective body when it addresses issues of general concern across a significant part of its area, e.g. bus services, or which require councillor decisions, e.g. planning applications. On 24<sup>th</sup> November North Area Committee considered a number of planning applications that raised issues that are of great concern to many communities and those of us not directly involved in any of the specific items found the debate and information provided very instructive.

The consideration of spending items such as small grants and funding of local environmental improvements are also matters where the full committee is an appropriate forum. The combined four wards generate sufficient business to make a worthwhile agenda without overloading members.

### **Very Local issues**

The opportunity to raise matters in the Open Forum has enabled direct input on matters of concern but some of these relate to very local and often intractable problems so might be better addressed in a different way.

I suggest specific issue working parties where there is a commitment and intention to actually get something done rather than just talk about getting something done. An example of such a group is the OCRA Fen Road group which brings together local residents, the Cam Conservatory and members of Cambridge City, Cambridgeshire County South Cambridgeshire and Milton Parish Councils. This group has identified several matters affecting the local communities and taken them up with the appropriate authorities.

The Area Committees could foster this approach on a task and finish basis. If it is to be effective local residents associations and other organisations will need to be willing to play their part.

### **Police Input**

The sessions involving the police provide an interesting overview of the crime situation across the north of the city and that is of value. I have doubts as to whether prioritising responses to things that by their very nature really need day to day monitoring and response makes any real sense apart from ticking someone's boxes.

### **Broadening the Role**

On 24<sup>th</sup> November we once again had an attempt to create informality and were asked to comment on a list of prospective topics for future meetings. The list was drawn from issues raised at consultation meetings earlier this year but omitted the one theme that had evoked most concern,

care of our built environment. It was difficult to see what could be achieved by discussing most of the following topics at North Area Committee:

**More things for young people to do:** discussing this in the absence of young people seems singularly pointless. If there are things they really want they should be directly involved in their development and provision. This would give them real ownership of the activity and a stake in making it work. If they are not prepared to get involved then they don't really want it.

**Better local housing:** as far as improvements to estates is concerned this should be a discussion with tenants at a local level. Why isn't it already happening? As to the wider issue of housing standards this is a matter for national government's building regulations which should implement whole of life standards for all new housing. We should at least include this expectation for housing in the City in the draft Local Plan even though it may be struck out at the inspection stage.

It was unfortunate that the attempt by a resident to raise the issue of redevelopment of existing garages for new housing, an issue arising out of the Strategic Housing Land Allocation exercise then in progress, could not be responded to in any effective way.

**Let's say good things about the area:** Oh Dear! If we are to have debates then these should be on the basis of adequate information with firm recommendations for action that is achievable by the City Council.

**People getting along:** having people giving talks is a way of occupying time but this is not the forum for it. If there is an issue that requires this input, the session on free jumping was a good example of such an issue, then we can learn about the organisations involved in a relevant context.

**What is happening about health care in the North Area:** this is a topic that requires its own set piece event once we actually know what the answer is going to be and should not be tacked on to another business meeting, it is too big and important for that.

**The role of faith groups in the north area:** this would be of interest but only in the context of a specific and relevant concern of the committee.

**Social inclusion in the area:** the suggestion that this should focus on how to include those on the "wrong side of the digital divide" rather misses the point that the increasing emphasis on using websites for everything is part of the problem not a solution. People in trouble need to interface with people not a machine, there are many who cannot cope with the small screen.

### **What to do?**

If Localism is to be more than a buzzword we need to take a different approach and engage with local communities at a more local level. At present the City Council appears to be saying "Tell us what you think and then we will decide how to spend your money for you." In my view the City Council should be more proactive in encouraging and enabling local communities to do things for themselves.

Community engagement needs to be built from the ground up. People will adopt formality when they see a real need for it. We should be supporting spontaneity with the minimum of prescription and procedure. The questions should be:

What do we want to do?

How are we going to do it?

Can we afford it?

At its best North Area Committee does do this in considering its local environmental programme but this is a minute fraction of what the City is actually spending on local services. What about involving us seriously in the rest?

The City Council has a good local precedent for actively supporting the community to do things for itself in the Kings Hedges Neighbourhood Partnership. A modest amount of funding can produce a great deal of activity run by and supported by local people. These more local partnerships could then take on the local intractable problems and develop their own solutions to them by answering the first two of my questions. The City Council would then come in on the third if and only if the resources needed were more than the partnership had available.

On bigger schemes the City Council should build partnerships with existing groups and organisations where more formal bodies or processes are needed. Organisations such as Community Associations and faith groups have a proven capacity to deliver major community infrastructure plus the ability to draw in funds from sources not open to the local authority. By taking partnership at the local level seriously the City Council can get a much bigger bang for its buck.

### **Area Committees as a Showcase**

The City Council has a website with a lot of information on it but few people have the time or inclination to monitor it. The Area Committee agendas provide an opportunity to alert people on forthcoming consultations and issues. City officers should be looking to dovetail their work and consultation programmes to make effective use of these meetings for consultation and discussion.

### **Discussing the Issues that matter**

During the coming year the item with the biggest impact on local communities will be the revision of the local plan. The importance of this document and supportive neighbourhood plans cannot be overstated given the draft proposals relating to sustainable development currently being considered by government. It is not too early to start raising options and issues at Area Committees. We have already identified two at the North Area Committee: loss of local pubs, often for conversion into student housing, and the continuing conversion of affordable family homes into HMOs, mostly for student accommodation.

I think a proactive approach to engaging local people now will help to engage them in a positive way at later stages in the exercise. People are interested in planning matters and the City Council has officers and members who can lead discussion on these very effectively.

### **Conclusion**

I was an extreme sceptic when the Area Committees were first set up but have come around to appreciating that they can be an effective way of engaging and involving people in the governance of the City. I think they can be even more effective in that role as long as they are used sparingly and do not drag on long into the night. Localism requires a complete change in approach to the way local authority business is done and part of this is to make it less authoritarian.

### **Michael Bond**

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