

The Friends of Abingdon  
Civic Society

Nicola Blackwood MP  
House of Commons,  
Westminster,  
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24 September 2014

Dear Ms Blackwood

We understand that, as well as being our MP, you are a member of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Civic Societies. We hope therefore that you will be attending the Civic Voice Fringe Event at next week's party conference on the question of "How can we give communities a greater say in the planning system". In anticipation of that, we are writing on behalf of The Friends of Abingdon Civic Society to express our serious concerns about the way the planning process is now working.

#### **Background**

In November 2011 the Rt Hon Greg Clark MP wrote in the introduction to the *Plain English Guide to the Localism Act* that the system "leaves people feeling 'done to' and imposed upon - the very opposite of the sense of participation and involvement on which a healthy democracy thrives". He went on to list the steps the Localism Act was taking, including "new rights and powers for communities and individuals; reform to make the planning system more democratic and more effective, and reform to ensure that decisions about housing are taken locally."

A few months later, in March 2012, Mr Clark, by now Minister for Planning, wrote in his forward to the *National Planning Policy Framework*: "Planning..... should be a collective enterprise. Yet, in recent years, planning has tended to exclude, rather than to include, people and communities. In part, this has been a result of targets being imposed, and decisions taken, by bodies remote from them. Dismantling the unaccountable regional apparatus and introducing neighbourhood planning addresses this."

#### **Current situation**

As a Civic Society with an active interest in planning matters we welcomed these initiatives. However, two to three years down the line we have the situation where it is apparent that large developers are taking advantage of the 'presumption in favour of sustainable development' and their financial muscle to obtain planning permission for inappropriate developments regardless of local concerns. The opinions of the Town Council, local residents, and others count for nothing.

In addition, even when conditions are placed on a planning permission, our experience in Abingdon has been that large developers are able to subsequently negotiate them away without reference back to elected councillors, or even contravene them altogether, with little, if any, penalty being applied. Large developers have deep pockets and can afford to use every possible legal channel to

ensure that they eventually get their own way. Of course, this is not an option that is open to the District Council which does not have the funds to defend continual legal challenges.

The situation is exacerbated in areas such as ours, where the District Council does not yet have a Local Plan in place so the developers essentially have a free hand. Although this should be remedied by next year, little more than lip service has been paid to the requirement of para 155 of the NPPF that "Early and meaningful engagement and collaboration with neighbourhoods, local organisations and businesses is essential. A wide section of the community should be proactively engaged, so that Local Plans, as far as possible, reflect a collective vision and a set of agreed priorities for the sustainable development of the area, including those contained in any neighbourhood plans that have been made".

We will be surprised if the revised draft of our local plan shows much, if any, evidence that the community has been able to make meaningful input.

Finally, one of the main planks of the Localism Act was the introduction of Neighbourhood Plans. In practice two major difficulties have emerged with these:

a) the process has been made so rigid and complex that (except perhaps for very small communities) the costs and effort involved in producing a plan are enormous, and far exceed the grants available

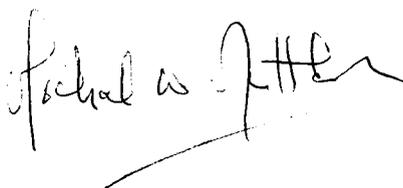
b) the Plans can only be developed with the active involvement of the Parish Council, so where that body is opposed (for whatever reason) to setting up a Neighbourhood Plan, the community has no way to make use of the "powers" created by the Act.

### **Conclusion**

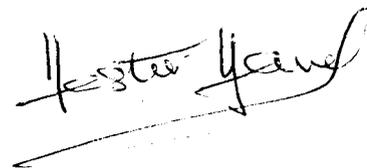
Here in Abingdon, despite our best efforts, we are left feeling impotent and disheartened. In our local experience, the planning procedure has become a sham and a worthless exercise, and needs a complete overhaul. At the very least, more weight should be given to local concerns and developers should not be allowed to continually resubmit applications, but ways have also to be found to address the bigger picture and deliver the fine intentions set out in the 2011/2012 legislation.

We are aware that you have spoken up on some local planning issues but, whether or not you attend the Civic Voice debate, we would very much like to hear your views on these broader aspects and, if you agree that there is a problem, what steps you will take to get them addressed.

Yours sincerely



**Michael Matthews**  
Chairman



**Hester Hand**  
Secretary