

AFFORDABLE HOUSING FOR LOCAL PEOPLE IN
EAST HANNINGFIELD
WHAT COULD POSSIBLY GO WRONG?

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(A Presentation given at the Parish Council Housing Seminar, Great Dunmow, 29/4/04)

For those of you unfamiliar with central Essex, I think I should give you a brief introduction to East Hanningfield. It is a lozenge shaped parish about two miles across and two and half miles north to south, about six miles to the east of Chelmsford. East Hanningfield village is slightly to the northeast of centre in the parish and is where the majority of the houses are situated. The village is set amongst fields and has a rural appearance with its village green surrounded by the more expensive local houses, two pubs and the church.

The present electoral role stands at 884 and there are 434 dwellings, so we are averaging slightly more than two adults per household.

When I tell you that it was at the Parish Council Meeting in April 1995 that the need for affordable housing for local people was first identified, and that as yet not one brick has been laid, you are probably going to wonder what I can possibly tell you that could be of any use. I hope I can give you an idea of the pitfalls that you might encounter if you embark on an affordable housing scheme and warn you of the perils ahead. Forewarned is forearmed!

The Parish Council obtained and digested the literature on the subject, and invited Chris Moore, who was then with the Rural Housing Trust, to speak to its Meeting in September of that year. Following her advice a Housing Needs Survey was undertaken during the month of December. The survey forms were hand delivered by the councillors to every household in the parish. The form itself was provided by the Trust, contained a covering explanatory letter, asked questions about local housing need and specific questions about the needs of the household.

171 forms came back, which is about a 39% return. 56 of them included written comments:

- 17 were in favour of an affordable housing scheme for local people and identified groups which they thought would or should benefit, although the survey identified 24 families or individuals in need of accommodation.
- 9 drew attention to the lack of infrastructure, for example doctor, shops and public transport.
- 7 disliked the architecture of the council estate.
- 7 commented that the council estate did not sufficiently house local people.
- 4 said that the council estate is where criminals emanate &
- 2 that more housing would mean more crime and problems.
- 4 liked the village the size it was.

- 2 thought the school was too small for further housing development. (Actually the school has since lost a teacher due to the falling role).
- 3 didn't believe that the housing would be for local people.
- 3 didn't want green belt or agricultural land built on.
- 3 wanted existing housing stock used.
- 2 said the housing would increase traffic.
- 2 that property values would decrease.
- 1 that it would alter the 'balance' of the village and
- 1 that it would increase the need in the long term.
- 1 didn't want a housing estate.
- 3 thought that the development should be small and
- 2 that it should be integrated through the village.
- 1 claimed that the Parish Council opposed planning applications for housing so it was the Parish Council's fault that there was a need and
- 1 suspected councillors of having an interest and land to sell.
(This became a recurring theme).

It was apparent that there was some misunderstanding of what a scheme of affordable housing for local people meant, and so the Parish Council asked me to explain it in the next parish newsletter which was delivered to every home.

As the survey had established that there was a local need the Council set up a working party to liaise with the Trust and the Housing and Planning Departments at Chelmsford Borough

Council. Councillors also visited successful schemes in other villages.

So what problems did we encounter? The Trust took some time to find a plot of land that an owner was prepared to sell at a price that would make the scheme affordable, but they did find a brown field plot that was a farm yard with several dilapidated buildings some containing asbestos. The removal of the buildings would be at the cost of the Trust and had to be recovered in some way, so a scheme was drawn up which was for five houses for local need and three for open market sale. The Planning Department wanted six affordable houses if there were to be three open market houses, making nine. By May 1999 the scheme had expanded to involve the construction of four homes for private sale, two for shared ownership and five for rent, making eleven. Finally in May 2000 the scheme had changed yet again to consist of 5 houses for key workers, five for rent by local people and two for shared ownership by local people, total twelve.

You have probably guessed that local people had something to say about the choice of site, in particular those living nearest. The site was approached through an estate of private houses and then through a narrow track between two of those houses. The neighbours of the site had a lot to say about increased traffic, and other losses of amenity. Some were taken by surprise that some of the housing would be for rent, even though this had always been stipulated in the Trust's literature. Also there were allegations of

backhanders to or from councillors. I was accused of suppressing offers of land in other areas of the village, (I had passed them all to the Trust but only one was abutting the village envelope and the owner of that wasn't prepared to sell at below development value). I was also accused of suppressing a letter of objection to the proposal (I later found out that although it was pushed through my door, it had been addressed to the Chairman by name so I had passed it on unopened). The point that they all agreed on was that the access track was too narrow, and they were not swayed by a letter of assurance from a Borough Highways engineer that the track was sufficient for a development of up to twelve houses. Latterly the inclusion of key worker housing caused further criticism and reinforced a view held by some that the scheme wouldn't be for local people anyway.

Meanwhile, things were not proceeding too happily within the Parish Council. From the beginning one member had never accepted that houses should be built for people who wanted to continue to live locally, but there were six others who were in favour of the scheme in principle. One dual hatted member became very active in communicating with the various bodies involved, in his capacity as borough councillor. In retrospect it appears that he might not have adequately informed those bodies that he was not representing the parish council at those meetings. As the changes to the scheme happened, from the outside, it probably looked as though the parish council was fully supportive whereas in fact the councillors were becoming concerned that the

scheme wasn't quite what they had expected and some were withdrawing their support. Two had come to agree with the residents that the access was too narrow.

When the planning application was considered by the council on 1st. February 2001 there were six councillors present. One declared an interest and left the meeting. Support for the application was carried three to two. The absent councillor had made it clear that he would have voted against so had he been present the Chairman would have had to use his casting vote.

What was the outcome?

The landowner died. There followed many months of waiting for probate to be settled and then the heir was unable to come to terms with the Trust on the sale, so the scheme at that site collapsed. The residents of the estate next to the site were left with a deep-seated distrust of the Parish Council, of me and of the dual hatted member. Some of the Parish Councillors were left suspicious that I had been somehow underhand in the project, and I was pretty sure who I thought was at fault.

What could have been done to have prevented the development of so much distrust and antipathy? Could the debate have been restricted to the real issues rather than accusations of dishonesty and secrecy?

While the project was in hand I was bewildered by the variety and range of criticisms that came the Council's way. Many of them showed that the complainants had not read or understood, or had just plain ignored the information that was made available to residents at public meetings and published in the village newsletter or in house-to-house leaflet drops.

This problem isn't just restricted to the Housing project, and is a problem the Council is trying to deal with. It was illustrated recently by a member of the public admitting during a Public Question Time that the parish newsletter goes straight in the bin.

A clear description of the project and the council's part in it needs to be given to residents from the start and then to continue to be accessible for those who didn't read it, chucked it or misunderstood it first time round. Perhaps this could be easily done by councils with a website, but those of us relying on noticeboards already find it hard enough to fit in all the statutory paperwork.

As the scheme develops additional information such as how many homes are needed and how the site was identified needs to be treated in the same way so that statements such as 'there is no local need' and questions like 'how did the council choose this site?' will be pre-empted.

I think the final point to make before moving on to the next scheme, is that protesters expect the people who want local accommodation to turn up at public meetings and argue their case. A few brave souls are prepared to do that, but it shouldn't be necessary, because the housing survey proves the need, and the need should not be open to debate. Parish Councillors should not expect the applicants to make themselves known in what can be a very intimidating atmosphere.

Anyway, that was last time. Are we getting it right this time?

We have now embarked on a scheme of affordable housing for local people in East Hanningfield mark two.

How are we doing?

Obviously, someone does read the parish newsletter, because on the strength of the published need for affordable housing for local people a local landowner made contact through his agent with two housing associations. After some delay waiting to find out which would be able to take on the scheme, I received a letter last June from Colne Housing asking to come to a Parish Council Meeting with an officer from the Borough Council, and in the meantime I put a request in the parish newsletter for anyone with a local housing need to let me have their names as the previous list of names was no longer available. I put a similar request in the next edition but am still coming into contact with people who think that

because they were on the previous list they are automatically on the new one.

Colne Housing, or rather Sandra Howard came along to the Parish Council Meeting held at the end of August, and she brought Nichola Plumb, Rural Housing Enabler, and Ann and Robert Jones of Essex Heritage Properties with her. Essex Heritage Properties would build the housing if it went ahead. A development of eight properties was being proposed with the potential to build a further four at a later date should the need arise.

It became clear that the previous housing survey was too old to be of any significance where an exception site was concerned, so there needed to be another one and fairly quickly because Colne Housing needed the results to accompany their bid for Government funding that Autumn. If they missed this window there wouldn't be another chance to apply for funding for another twelve months.

Colne would engage Nichola to process the survey, and all the Parish Council had to do was get the questionnaires out to every house at top speed. Most of the forms were delivered by hand, but a few of the outlying houses received them by post with a stamped addressed envelope supplied to send them back to Mackmurdo House. The form was in two parts, the first asked general questions about the provision of housing and the second asked to be completed by those in housing need. Each form was

accompanied by an envelope so that it could be sealed and would remain confidential until Nichola opened it. There was also an explanatory sheet saying that the purpose of the survey was to find out whether there was still a requirement for affordable housing for local people, and that if a need was identified a small number of affordable homes could be provided by Colne Housing.

I was relieved that I would have nothing to do with the analysis of the survey, that it would be carried out by an independent person, and that everyone who completed the survey would know that. It didn't quite have that effect, because one resident included a letter to me in the envelope, but I think on the whole it has kept me at a distance from the survey.

As the Village Fete was taking place on 13th. September, a small exhibition was displayed in the Village Hall for that afternoon which gave those attending the opportunity to take an extra copy of the second part of the form, and to take an application form for the Chelmsford Borough Housing Register. It was thought that family members who had moved away might come back to the village for the fete, so it would be a good opportunity to reach them. Again some people managed to miss the exhibition, as I found out later.

This time 80 survey forms came back, which was less than half of the number returned in the previous survey. I think this was due to having to undertake the survey at such speed. Possibly, a better response would have been achieved had we been able to

publicise it before hand in the parish newsletter (even if some people do throw it away without reading it). Anyway, although there were fewer returns a greater need was identified, as it amounted to 29. I have since received more registrations of interest, so we are now up to the mid thirties.

The Parish Council agreed that they would support the scheme as the need had been demonstrated.

There then began the long wait for the decision about Government funding.

Nichola presented the figures to the Council informally at its meeting at the end of October, and provided them as a report in January. The figures were included in the Minutes of the Meeting held at the end of January, but because the Minutes are not posted on the noticeboards until they have been signed, they hadn't been seen by the members of the public who came along to the following meeting when Sandra Howard came along to present the updated plans.

Here's a lesson to you. Put the results of the survey up in public as soon as you have them, it might prevent a great deal of time being wasted during your public question time on listening to statements from members of the public who do not know anyone who needs a house in the village, so there can't be anyone. You will probably still have to hear statements about buying their house because of

the view, how undesirable council tenants are, and why aren't the applicants here to argue their case? but you aren't going to get away with a completely quiet life. It might even strike you as ironic that the most vociferous objectors to a proposed development are living in some of the most recently built houses.

Sandra didn't say much at the meeting, but she did explain that the changes to the plans were due to requirements of the Borough Planners. Also it had been decided that the local need was so great that all twelve houses would be built at once rather than eight at first followed by four later.

We were still awaiting news of the Government funding.

By the end of March I was able to announce to the Parish Council that the Housing Corporation had published its total grant allocation, but had not specified where the money was going.

And last week I informed the Council that the grant was allocated to the East Hanningfield scheme. A planning application is expected to be submitted by the end of this week.

If all goes to schedule construction might begin in August and people move in next May.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING FOR LOCAL PEOPLE IN EAST HANNINGFIELD PART 2

WHAT ELSE COULD POSSIBLY GO WRONG?

There follow extracts from the Parish Council reports in East Hanningfield News.

JUNE 2004

In the last News I wrote that we are waiting to hear whether Government funding had been forthcoming for the scheme of affordable housing for local people in East Hanningfield. Funding was confirmed in April, and at time of writing a planning application for the scheme is expected to be submitted to Chelmsford Borough Council any day. I understand from Colne Housing that if the planning application is successful construction is expected to begin in mid-September. The builder is promising completion by December 2005 at the latest, but a much earlier date is more likely.

At the time of writing PC had just received notice of a planning application for a nine plot private gypsy site in the two fields between Old Church Road and Back Lane next to Balckthorne and Arlberg (application no. 04/01018). PC is about to hold an extraordinary meeting in order to determine the initial response to the application, to make arrangements for a public meeting and to set in motion any other actions thought necessary. Details of the application should be available on Chelmsford Borough Council's website.

SEPTEMBER 2004

Since I wrote for the last Newsleter, the matter of the gypsy site planning application has moved on. Most of you will know that the applicant, Smart Planning, withdrew the application for the nine pitch site on the day of the Planning Committee meeting at Chelmsford Borough Council. Shortly after that they submitted a new application for a three pitch site and another application on the same site for twelve affordable houses. Both these applications and the application by Colne Housing for affordable housing will be considered by the Planning Committee at its meeting on 14th. September.

The applications by Smart Planning have had a considerable impact on Parish Council's resources in terms of time and money. The employment of a planning consultant has enabled Parish Council to produce detailed planning documents to support its case against the gypsy site applications, and also has given PC the material on which to base information leaflets which have been distributed to residents.

Inevitably, there will have to be some painful decisions made when it comes to preparing the budget for the next financial year. Will the very deep hole eaten into reserves be made up by an increase in Council Tax or reduced spending, or both? The repercussions of these speculative planning applications on our parish could be long standing and wide ranging even if the developments never take place, because of the resulting inability of the Parish Council to spend proactively on projects for the community.

What is particularly worrying is that we have no idea how many more planning applications we are going to have to deal with for the same site.

As mentioned earlier, the Colne Housing planning application is to be determined by the Planning Committee at its meeting on 14th. September. This is much later than expected and will prevent the previously anticipated start of construction by mid September. People with local connections are continuing to come forward to register for the housing. Although I am required to protect the confidentiality of the applicants, I can say that there does not seem to be any typical applicant; they come in all ages and family sizes. If you are considering applying for this housing, please ensure that you are on the Borough Council's Housing Register.

DECEMBER 2004

Since publication of the Autumn Newsletter, there has been considerable planning activity. Smart Planning's applications for a three pitch gypsy site and for twelve units of affordable housing on the site between Back Lane and Old Church Road were refused by Chelmsford Borough Council's Planning Committee. Smart Planning has appealed to the Planning Inspectorate against refusal of permission for the affordable housing.

The scheme of affordable housing for local people is proceeding. Planning permission was granted and work on the site should start very soon. The only delay is the drawing up of a legal agreement between Colne Housing and the Borough Council, and that is

moving on swiftly. I am still receiving applications for the housing at regular intervals, and they have yet to be allocated.

MARCH 2005

At the time of publication of the last News, the signing of the legal agreement associated with the scheme of affordable housing for local people was expected within a few days. This was prevented by Smart Planning (of the two gypsy site applications and other 'affordable' housing scheme) indicating the intention to Chelmsford Borough Council of seeking a judicial review about the way the two affordable housing applications had been handled. CBC's legal team reported to the Planning Committee that there were no grounds for judicial review so at the meeting on 11th. January, the Colne Housing application was confirmed as granted. The legal side was then rescheduled for 7th. February, so two months were lost. The Housing Corporation was aware of the situation and confirmed that the funding allocation would not be lost. This project has suffered repeated setbacks, but is still going ahead, and as yet the housing has not been allocated, so applications are still being accepted. Completion is now scheduled for August 2006. PC is planning a ceremony to celebrate the start of works at the site, so keep an eye open for the publicity for that.

JUNE 2005

At the time of writing I have received verbal notice from Chelmsford Borough Council that Smart Planning has appealed to the Planning Inspectorate against refusal of planning permission

for their gypsy site application. All comments sent to CBC on the application will automatically be passed to the planning inspector, so there is no need to send them again. PC will keep you informed of what is happening in this matter with information on the noticeboards and the website.

SEPTEMBER 2005

It seems that with each News I anticipate being able to provide more information about the affordable housing scheme in the next edition, but each time we seem to have suffered yet another setback. Following refusal of planning permission for the housing development proposed by Smart Planning and granting of planning permission for the affordable housing scheme by Colne Housing, Smart Planning called for a judicial review on the grounds that their application had not been treated fairly. The judicial review took place on 6th. July, and the judge found that due to an error in the Borough Council's paperwork, Smart Planning did have grounds for complaint so the Colne Housing consent was overturned. Following this, the Borough Council's Planning Committee reiterated its support for the Colne Housing scheme, and its objections to the Smart Planning proposals. On 26th. July a Local Inquiry was held into Smart Planning's appeal against refusal of planning permission, at which Chairman Les Draper presented the PC view. The inspector holding the Inquiry undertook to produce his report in four weeks, so it should be published at about the same time as this News.

At this point it is not a good idea to speculate about what might happen. Colne Housing is still waiting to instruct its builder to start work on the site, and has been ready to do so since last December.

DECEMBER 2005

In the last News I said that we were awaiting the decision from the planning inspector regarding the appeal by Smart Planning against refusal of planning permission for their housing development proposal. The appeal was dismissed, which means it failed. Chelmsford Borough Council's Planning Committee then re-granted Colne Housing planning permission for their scheme of affordable housing for local people. If you go down Old Church Road you can't fail to see the signboards marking the site, where some preliminary work has already taken place. Completion of the housing will be some time in the Spring of 2007. Chelmsford Borough Council is still accepting applications, but if you apply please make sure that your application clearly states that it is for the Colne Housing at East Hanningfield so that it doesn't go into the borough-wide list.

SPRING 2006

There has been a prolonged discussion with CBC about the naming of the new street where the affordable housing for local people is being built. PC's proposal to name it after Mr. Chennells who provided the land was not acceptable due to a longstanding policy that streets should not be named after living persons. PC

appealed against the decision but it was upheld by the Cabinet Member, so we returned to PC's tradition of giving new street names with historical associations. The cul-de-sac is therefore to be called Geffrey Close. We can still use the name PC wanted because the properties facing Old Church Road will have to be named, so they are going to be 1-4 Chennells. The historical significance of the name Geffrey will be explained in a future issue of the News.

JUNE 2006

There is still time to apply for the affordable housing being built in Old Church Road. If you are interested in the shared ownership properties the cut off date is 31st. July, but you have until 30th. November to apply for the rented housing. You can find the application form on the PC website, or ask me for one. There is to be an open house on a Saturday in August, so that you can see one of the houses on the inside. The date will be posted on the noticeboards and website. Some of the Parish Councillors have already had a chance to view the houses under construction and were impressed by their quality.

SEPTEMBER 2006

Anyone who travels down Old Church Road will have noticed the progress of the construction of the affordable housing. Although it is too late to apply for the four shared ownership houses now, there is still time to register for the rented housing, which comprises six houses, a first floor flat and a ground floor flat for a

disabled tenant. The registration form is available on the Parish Council's website, or on paper from me.

MARCH 2007

As a postscript to the Scheme of Affordable Housing for Local People you might be interested to know that the Borough Council's Housing Department has provided statistics on the allocations. There were 101 applications received; 73 households applied for rented accommodation, 8 for shared ownership and 20 applied for either. Seven applications were withdrawn for various reasons. Forty nine applications had no local connection, so could not be considered. Fifteen were from households with connections to neighbouring parishes, who might have been considered had there been too few local candidates. That left 30 households to be considered for twelve properties.

JUNE 2007

You will probably have seen the article in the Chronicle about the official opening of the affordable housing at Geoffrey Close. It was in April 1995 that the need for affordable housing was first broached at a Parish Council meeting. PC has been working towards fulfilling that need ever since, so it is a tribute to the determination of all those involved in the project over the last twelve years that the project has been completed despite the numerous obstacles that halted progress.