

EXETER ST JAMES FORUM
REPORT TO ANNUAL MEETING ON BEHALF
OF STEERING GROUP 2017-2018

It was a privilege to be elected to Chair the ESJF SG for the year commencing July 2018. I could not have managed the task without the assistance of the Officers, the elected members of SG and the other representatives who attend meetings, particularly our Councillors. In addition, representatives from our Residents' Associations, the University, student wardens have been actively engaged in the work undertaken by SG during the year. Thank you to all of them.

The SG has met on 8 occasions during the year and our AGM has been put back to September in accordance with the new Constitution approved at the 2017 AGM. Many matters have been discussed and action has been taken or proposed as will be seen throughout this Report.

The key responsibilities of SG are to promote the aims and ambitions of the Neighbourhood Plan. Much of this work has involved Planning and whilst we do not see eye to eye on many applications the Planning Officers of Exeter City Council have kept us informed as to those applications, have been prepared to meet with us to discuss applications and with the help of our City Councillors we have achieved some successes. Another main topic of discussion at SG meetings was the progress of the Queen's Crescent Garden (QCG) project. Problems with enforcement of residents' parking regulations, unsocial behaviour and other issues raised by RAs have all been dealt with on fairly packed agendas. This is to be welcomed and ESJF thrives and the SG remain on track to ensure it continues to do so.

Neighbourhood Plan

For those involved from the very beginning it is difficult to believe that so many years have passed since the ESJF came into being and that the NP became part of the statutory process in Exeter in 2013. Like all good documents it needs updating from time to time and ESJF are about to embark on this process. Grant funding will be secured to enable the residents to be consulted and take part in the process that will be taking place over the next 3 to 6 months to draft an updated plan. New projects; new aspirations; new thoughts will all be welcome.

There have been difficulties with the current plan, of which the over-riding objective was to see a better degree of community balance. Sadly, thus far we have not succeeded. The settled population has fallen to well below 50% of the total population of the Neighbourhood Plan area.

As a Statutory Consultee the Council informs us of major planning applications in St James and in some cases we are consulted by developers at the pre-application stage, encouraged to do so by Planning Officers. Members of the SG monitor all St James' planning applications and not only have our Councillors spoken on behalf of

the ESJF position, but I have spoken at a number of Planning Committees and we have had our successes.

Writing to oppose planning applications that are believed to be contrary to the NP is also one of the important contributions made not just by members of SG, but by and on behalf of RAs, and, very importantly, by individual members. I would like to thank all those who have not only battled with the challenge of working their way through the ECC website, but have gone on to write letters of objection. That letter writing support, whether very thorough or merely a sentence clearly stating objection, is invaluable and I pay tribute to the time you spend. If anyone else would like to find out more about making a contribution in this way please do ask and join in.

We have learned along the way that inclusion of more detailed statistics and percentages in Neighbourhood Plan policies may be of assistance in defending the plan and helping to achieve our over-riding objective.

Early in the year we were surprised by an application to increase the number of flats in the Football Club student accommodation development. I am pleased to report that this was rejected on the casting vote of the Planning Committee Chairman. At a subsequent meeting with the developer we were given a cast iron assurance that the decision would not be appealed and that the space would be turned over to internal community space. We were also asked if there were any other matters to draw to the attention of GSA who had purchased the site from Yelverton the original developer. We raised: Issues of CCTV coverage in Stadium Way and along the alleyway at the back of the stadium; the fact that most starts and ends of term when traffic would be at its heaviest were during the football season; request that a no car policy would be adopted with respect to tenants and appropriate level of security on site to deal with anti-social behaviour. The intention is to remain in touch.

The Clock Tower Hotel also provided much debate during the year. Again, ECC dismissed the planning application to turn the building into a student dwelling. An appeal was raised and many members did a lot of work to prepare for that appeal, which was then withdrawn. We were confident that we had robust arguments against those plans, but we now wait for their next steps.

Sadly, we lost the argument for the development on the site of the King Billy. On the first occasion it came before the Planning Committee the matter was deferred as serious questions were raised as to fire safety, but in spite of our best efforts the plans were approved on the subsequent occasion.

Other smaller, but no less important planning applications have also been monitored and objected to and SG will continue to work to not only uphold, but to promote the over-riding objective.

One of the key and missing pieces of information throughout the year was an accurate set of figures as to actual and proposed student numbers; the number of student shared houses, occupation of existing Purpose Built Student Accommodation (PBSA). There are now some numbers, but at the time of writing it

is understood that there may be plans to increase the University population to 36,000 over the next few years.

In addition to matters specifically within the NP boundary we also made representations regarding the closure of Paris Street. The anticipated Public Enquiry did not take place as Land Securities pulled the development scheme for shops and other facilities. Our main objection had been the additional stresses and strains on York Road together with much higher levels of pollution than at present. Only time will tell if this is a battle won or whether there will be another application to close Paris Street.

Initiation, monitoring and Support of Community Projects

Queen's Crescent Garden

No one should underestimate the many hundreds of hours that Robyn Connett has expended on this project. We all owe her an enormous debt of gratitude for persevering and overcoming any number of hurdles. Paul Layton on behalf of Exeter St James Community Trust (ESJCT) also devoted much time to this project.

Finally the Lease was signed, and with the Trust now having legal responsibility, it was also the appointed time for the handover of the QCG project from the Forum to the Trust. The Forum will continue to take much interest, of course, but are delighted that the community's top priority project is now in the safe hands of the Trust we set up for such purposes. The long anticipated celebratory summer event was held in July, attended by the Lord Mayor, and concluding with a stellar choir performance by St Sidwell's school. Even the event was not without difficulty – who knew you had to measure gazebos and ensure that hot water urns had to be positioned many feet away from the hot drinks serving point?! Thanks to Robyn these seemingly insurmountable problems were resolved and thanks to all those who volunteered to act as stewards and stall holders on the day, which was wonderfully bright and sunny (even though the gazebos had been erected in early morning drizzle).

The regular mowing teams have been hard at work, the clean-up that took place before the Party found all sorts of detritus and a work of art was briefly on display in May when we were happy to provide QCG as the venue for artist Hugh McCann's Art Week Exeter award-winning project . Thanks to Kier Construction a huge number of old bricks that would otherwise have been destroyed as a result of the St James' student development were piled on to pallets and are being stored for us. Kier have promised to pay for their return to QCG as soon as we need them.

We are delighted the Trust has grant funding in place to enable work to be started and there are on-going discussions regarding appropriate CCTV camera installation to protect QCG from the incidents of anti-social behaviour that beleaguer the gardens at present.

St James Vegetable Gardens Project

Whilst the SJVG members are still hard at work on their plots at St James Station, sadly it ceased to be a project of the Forum in December. In spite of a lot of hard

work, the anticipated handover of responsibility for this project from the Forum to the Trust, with the Trust signing a lease with Network Rail to secure the site for St James' residents as a community enterprise, failed to materialise.

Instead of submitting the draft lease and other documents to the Trust, which had repeatedly confirmed a willingness to sign the lease, importantly subject to legal review and approval, the long wait ended when SJVG announced their unilateral decision not to pursue this route, preferring to go into collaboration with St Sidwell's Community Trust. For that reason during the year the finances that had been managed by our Treasurer were finalised and the sums due and owing to SJVG were transferred to St Sidwell's Community Trust.

St James Park Station Project

The two NP projects related to the station and the railway corridor continued to be pursued through liaison with Avocet Rail Users' Group whose Chairman is Forum Member, Mike Reddaway.

Heritage Project

This project, to develop a Heritage Trail around St James, remains stalled for the present. There does remain good support for the idea, but as with so many things, we need more volunteers to make the idea a reality.

Assets of Community Value

The ECC website states "Across the city there are buildings and amenities that are important to the communities that use them. These could include, for example, a shop, a pub, or a library. The closure or sale of these places can sometimes damage communities. Under the Localism Act, voluntary and community associations can nominate an asset to be included on a list of "assets of community value" held by the Council. If the owner of a listed asset wants to sell it, they must tell the Council. The community will then be given a period of time to prepare and make a bid for the asset."

Sadly, the application to have Rabbit café recognised as an asset of community value was unsuccessful.

Let By and To Let signs: Project to declutter the ward by working with the Council

Annette Plaut has been grappling with this issue for some time and believed that she had the full support of the Council when she alerted local agents of the protocol agreed with the City Council in 2014 an initiative called for in the NP.

There have been difficulties along the way and for a while it seemed that the project might stall, but further discussions have been held with Planning at ECC and it does now appear that all agents are aware of the protocol - after all they did agree to abide by the same. It is hoped that over the coming months we will see some considerable improvements.

Thanks are also due to our local councillors who have nudged ECC when necessary into giving Annette the support that remains required.

Street Planting

To date there has not been much progress, the mood becoming very downbeat and spirits disheartened when two trees were destroyed in Prospect Park. However, the long hot summer and the promise by Sue Aves to fund replacements from her local community budget lifted our spirits and Beth Osment hopes to be able to get some preliminary project work underway. This may well form part of the ideas and thinking in the new neighbourhood plan.

Working with Other Bodies Representing the Community of St James

Exeter Community Forum

Representation at ECF Meetings this year has sadly been a bit hit and miss by ESJF. Fortunately Paul Layton has attended the meetings on behalf of ESJCT and so we have been kept abreast of some events.

In the last few weeks Robyn Connett and I attended the AGM. We were aware in advance that Diana Moore had resigned as Chair of ECF and she spoke passionately at the meeting explaining why she had felt the need to resign. She is concerned that community involvement is being squeezed out, with unilateral decisions being made by the Council including changes to the agreed terms of reference of ECF and disregard for the community strategy that all members of ECF's Steering Group, both council and community reps, had agreed. She has formed the view that the Grassroots Grants panel which looks at bids for funding from the 15% neighbourhood portion of Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) money is at risk of becoming council rather than community dominated, marginalising the community's influence in recommending how this particular funding should be allocated against agreed criteria. The Council claims to espouse 'Asset-Based Community Development', but all the evidence is that this is not what is happening in practice.

This is a critical time for ECF and a decision over its future was delayed until 23 October so that community groups have time to discuss whether to support its

continuation despite the context of disempowerment, and for people willing to stand as Chair and SG members to come forward. Do let us know your views.

ESJF pointed out at that meeting and at the Focus Group Meeting held the following day that as a body with a NP we were entitled to choose either 25% CIL arising from development in St James or to share with all other neighbourhoods in 15% of the CIL receipts from city-wide development. On the basis of the terms and conditions agreed between council and community reps forming ECF, we chose not to set ourselves apart from other neighbourhoods, but to share in the city-wide 15%. Had we known that the Council would abandon the agreements without any discussion with ECF Steering Group, and threatening to take control of all the decision-making, we have no doubt that we would have chosen the 25% of local receipts, over which we would have had much more control, ensuring it was spent where the community decided it was most needed to improve the neighbourhood.

A report has been commissioned by Red Quadrant Consultants and Robyn and I attended the focus group the next day which was supposed to explore how we would like grant funding to be allocated and awarded, to feed into ECC's City Grants' Review. I am not altogether sure that was achieved because there was much discussion about Community Builders, an initiative that arose from ECF and paid for from the 15% CIL, but whose recruitment, appointment and decisions over remit etc., have been taken away from ECF SG, with no consultation. Apparently St James has a Community Builder, but how this appointee is expected to interface with local councillors and with groups such as Exeter St James Forum remains to be seen. .

Exeter St James Community Trust Ltd.

The Trust Board has met on 6 occasions during the past year. The AGM was held on 11 October. The Trust now has over 270 shareholding members.

QCG was the main focus of their attention as has been described above. The trust was disappointed that SJVG decided not to pursue the offer by the Trust with respect to the Lease from Network Rail and that SJVG is therefore not a project of the ESJF.

Thanks to Gaynor Carr for all her hard work in producing *About St James*, joint bi-annual publication with the Trust. Thanks also to Karen Payne for obtaining advertising revenue for *About St James* for a number of issues. Again we are always looking for volunteers particularly as the next issue may well be Gaynor's last issue for the time being.

Working with the University, City Councillors, County Councillors and Police.

It is a key element of the NP that ESJF works with the above groups to manage any adverse impacts that arise from the high levels of student accommodation within the ward.

As has been set out in this report already we have excellent support from each of our City County Councillors. Not only do they deal with issues on our behalf they put us in touch with the right Council Officers.

We also liaise closely with Rory Cunningham the University Community Liaison Officer who regularly attends our SG Meetings. Rory ensure that we are kept informed of relevant issues and has taken issues up on our behalf. We are also pleased to see the local Student Wardens at our SG Meetings.

ESJF attends the University Residents' Liaison Meetings and the Police briefings on freshers' week and similar briefings held throughout the year.

Anti-social behaviour, transient noise, litter and car parking always feature heavily in these discussions. ESJF again would like to stress that we are not anti-student, but that the University must and to an extent through Rory does recognise its responsibilities to the settled population.

To that end a further meeting should have been arranged during the year to meet with senior Council Officers and senior University personnel, indeed a date was fixed that was found to be unsuitable for a number of attendees. ESJF are renewing their attempts to get such a meeting set up during the coming academic year.

The meeting held last year had resulted in several commitments being given by ECC Chief Executive, Karime Hassan, with respect to the Article 4 Direction and the rise in the number of council tax exemptions in spite of the Direction. He has also confirmed that ECC were committed to the removal of graffiti and enforcing the protocol with letting agents. The lack of data on student numbers, council tax exemptions resulted in our councillors pressing ECC again and again for the information. Towards the end of the year data has been produced, but ESJF remain concerned that the integrity of the NP is being compromised by ECC.

Resident's Parking Permits

The small scale survey conducted and viewed by DCC Officers, resulted in an acknowledgement that there was a significant degree of abuse. This had previously been questioned by Chris Rook of Devon County Council. SG will continue to seek action by DCC. Members have done considerable research and produced details of the work done by other Councils to ensure that there is very little abuse and will keep pressing DCC to take action. It remains unacceptable that checks are not being made to ensure that those applying for permits are entitled to permits – that applies to all residents of St James and not just students. Briefing papers have been produced, examples have been provided, but SG believe that insufficient steps have been taken and will not be easing up on this issue.

In addition, SG have asked and are hoping that PBSA developments stop inserting clauses into their contracts preventing students from parking within a set distance of the PBSA, but seeking an assurance that those living in a PBSA do not bring cars into the City. This will be a long term project. SG will also keep pressing the University to continue to strengthen the "you should not bring a car into the City" message in all publications, both written and on-line. SG acknowledges that some progress has been made, but know from their own experience and the experience reported to them that there is still too high a % of students bringing cars into Exeter that they then effectively abandon a street somewhere in Exeter.

Royal Horticultural Society “It’s Your Neighbourhood Scheme”

SG continue to liaise with the RHS IYN regional organiser. Thanks are due to Susie Bower for all the work she undertakes to ensure that St James features in the judging and escorts the judges round the planned route.

Judging takes place in July and in 2018 there were 7 individual entries in the NP area.

.....And finally

SG always welcomes comments and ideas for Members and Associate Members. I would like to thank those who have contacted us through the website or by email during the year. Your ideas are always of interest – so please keep coming up with suggestions, proposals, projects and comments. Thanks are extended to all those who have helped in so many ways over the past 12 months.

The next few months will give everyone an opportunity to set out their thoughts on what should be contained in the updated NP. It is up to us to ensure that St James is the vibrant and attractive area that we want it to be.

If you feel you can help to make any of those plans and projects happen then please step forward – there can never be too many volunteers and SG hope to be working with you over the next year to make some of our project dreams into a reality.