

EXETER ST JAMES FORUM
REPORT TO ANNUAL MEETING ON BEHALF
OF STEERING GROUP 2019-2020

Who could have suspected that when we held our AGM on 27th November 2019 that we would have less than 4 months of face to face Steering Group meetings before the next AGM, an AGM put off until the last possible moment in the hope that we would have been able to meet face to face. Behind closed doors, however, a lot of the work has continued and we have all been cheered on our forays into the outside world by the progress being made in Queens Crescent Garden.

Our councillors have continued their work, albeit through virtual meetings, and we are grateful for the help and support received. It has been a difficult and unusual time for the University; our local Residents' Associations and other local community groups and many others who have been actively engaged not only in work for ESJF during the year, but in a community effort to ensure that those who needed help, who were shielding or vulnerable received the support that they needed.

As a result of the pandemic, the SG only met (1 4 19 – 31 3 20) twice in the early part of 2020 and once by way of a Zoom Meeting. There were a number of email communications seeking the views of SG during the year on planning and issues surrounding the return of students in September 2020, but it cannot be denied that it has been a difficult year.

The key objectives of SG are to promote the aims and ambitions of the Neighbourhood Plan. Much of this work has involved Planning and as ever there are occasions when we have felt that the key objective of the Neighbourhood Plan which is to seek a balanced community has been overlooked. We continue to have a good working relationship with the Planning Officers at Exeter City Council who have not only kept us informed as to the applications made, but have been willing to meet with us to discuss applications. Indeed, in some cases they have recommended that architects/ developers come and talk to us. There have also been some successes.

There is now some obvious and significant progress with Queen's Crescent Garden (QCG). The parking problems have not gone away. It would appear, whilst the University tell us that there are fewer students bringing cars to Exeter, that parking problems continue to be widespread. Behaviour that did not conform to the various Covid guidelines and regulations, transient noise and refuse have been other themes.

Neighbourhood Plan (NP)

Exeter St James Forum (ESJF) remains the Statutory Consultee for all planning applications within our neighbourhood area and SG members monitor these planning applications. Not only have our Councillors' spoken on behalf of the ESJF position, but reports have been written, objections have been tabled and we continue to take a balanced approach to planning matters. Objecting to those applications that are likely

to cause further imbalance in the local population and supporting those that contribute to the vision of the community embodied in the NP.

I am very grateful to all those who have taken the trouble to write to ECC about specific planning applications. This is an important contribution by anyone who lives in the NP area. Individual letters and comments can and do sometimes make a difference. If anyone else would like to find out more about making a contribution in this way, please do ask and join in.

Outside the NP area there are a number of concerning developments and there seems to be an intention by ECC to go for higher build with greater density. Called co-living, these developments circumvent planning regulations with respect to room size and are little more than a replica of the student PBSAs being aimed at single people. Following discussion over a proposal to change a St James PBSA to a co-living block, ESJF prepared a report drawing on the experiences of other cities. There seems to have been no analysis as to the need for such developments in Exeter however in recent months such applications have been approved.

In 2019 SG was invited by the City Council planning officers to comment on a draft Enforcement Policy. It was felt that the draft fell far short of what was so badly needed and the comments SG submitted led to a complete redrafting. There is now a revised policy and whilst better than the earlier draft the final Enforcement Policy introduced by ECC during the year still raises concerns that the unscrupulous will continue to try and evade planning rules. SG will continue to be watchful. Upheld ECC's refusal to grant permission for the business unit at the rear of 13 St James Road to be converted for residential use.

Other smaller, but no less important planning applications have also been monitored and objected to when necessary and SG will continue to work, not only to uphold, but to promote the over-riding objective of the NP. We will, in particular, continue to monitor any applications to increase the size of existing HMOs. We have continued to object to a number of these and have had some success. If the objective of an application is aimed at releasing a property back into family use, there is less likelihood of an objection. However, increasing the size of an HMO is likely to be argued as being contrary to the over-riding objective of the NP.

There have been different traffic issues during the year and with schools partially closed for many months less traffic. We have yet to see the full impact of the traffic arrangements made around the Bus Station development and it remains a cause of considerable concern that the traffic impact along York Road is being overlooked by both DCC and ECC.

Initiation, monitoring and Support of Community Projects

Queen's Crescent Garden

Since July 2018 when the regeneration and management of the Garden became the responsibility of the Exeter St James Community Trust Ltd (ESJCT), SG has continued to take a close interest in, and support, the Queen's Crescent Garden (QCG) Project.

More information can now be found on page 4 of this report under the ESJCT Report, but all Members are urged to join the Trust, too, to be kept fully informed.

St James Park Station Project

The lengthening of the platforms created disturbance for local residents during 2020 and January 2021 and a number of representations were made by our local councillors with respect to lights, times machinery was to be used, the idling of vehicles and other similar issues. Whilst all understood the need for the work to be undertaken there did seem to be an unfortunate disregard, from time to time, for the rights of local residents to quiet enjoyment of life.

Assets of Community Value (ACV)

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.”

There has been no resolution to the issue of St Anne’s Well and why ESJF was not informed that it was to be placed on the market for sale, in spite of the fact that an ACV had been in place since 13 June 2016 as initiated by ESJF.

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

In the 2019 Report the issues of the “To Let” Boards were set out in some detail. There has been a little progress, however, ECC remain of the view that the harm caused by high level of letting boards being displayed does not justify pursuing a Regulation 7 Direction with the Government to remove the right to display the signs without making an application for advertisement consent.

Just before the 2019 AGM our three City Councillors met with Roger Clotworthy, Assistant City Development Manager (Planning), and he agreed to contact the estate agents listed as members of Exeter Estate Agents Association asking them to reply within two weeks regarding upholding the protocol. He agreed to make clear to them the action that the Council ~~will~~ would take if they fail to confirm their agreement to abide by the protocol and also to do so in practice.

Since then it does appear that there have been fewer signs. Only time will tell if this is because Estate Agents are abiding by the voluntary agreement not to display such boards, or whether it is more due to the pandemic.

Graffiti removal

ESJF SG has continued to be assiduous in reporting the graffiti and in ensuring that steps are taken promptly to remove the same.

Working with Other Bodies Representing the Community of St James

Exeter Community Forum (ECF)

This has ceased to exist with a new grant funding strategy in place. Fortunately, the Ward Grants determined by the City Councillors continue, but grant funding from the neighbourhood portion of Community Infrastructure Levy, that had been the responsibility of the community-led ECF, under approval by ECC, is now the responsibility of a Councillor led Committee

Exeter St James Community Trust Ltd.

The Steering Group receives regular reports regarding the Queen's Crescent Garden project from Exeter St James Community Trust, set up by The Forum to acquire the Lease and take full responsibility for the Garden into the future.

A particular interest is taken in the regeneration project as set out in the Masterplan that was prepared, following extensive community-wide consultation, while the project remained the responsibility of the Forum. Progress reported by the Trust during the year ending 31 March 2020 has been very pleasing.

Planning permission was obtained in October for detailed internal hard landscaping, updating the community's Masterplan layout as necessary to accommodate issues identified in investigations and surveys, most notably the precise location of the Longbrook culvert. Work packages were prepared and invitations sent out to tender for the completion of the boundary wall restoration and construction of the final entrance and steps into the Garden. Following a setback of delays due to illness of the first appointed builder, a replacement company was appointed, scheduled to commence work at the close of this annual period. A fabricator was also appointed to produce railings for the perimeter walls along the York Road and Queens Crescent.

The Forum and Trust joined together to organise a very successful Pop-Up Plant Sale in the Garden over two days in July 2019. attracting visitors from as far as Moretonhampstead and Exmouth as well as local residents. The Trust Directors had been looking forward to respond to the many positive comments received, by making such events a regular feature, expanding to include book sales, but the pandemic sadly means that these plans for 2020 have had to be put on hold.

Two further issues of About St James, the joint Forum and Trust newsletter, were produced during the year and delivered to each property, residential and business, throughout St James. The Forum is grateful once again to our City Councillors for awarding a Ward Grant to supplement the advertising revenue to meet the printing costs together with a grant from ECC.

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

A key element of the NP requires that ESJF works with representatives from the University.

A particular source of concern was caused by what ESJF believe was a fundamental misinterpretation of the guidelines by the University resulting in problems for the settled community and for the students in May 2020. The University did not acknowledge the concerns of local residents at a Residents' Liaison Meeting and we watched, with horror, as there was an all too predictable spike in Coronavirus cases amongst the University population, putting the lives of both students and the local community at risk. The unruly minority that partied causing problems and ESJF approached the media as did a number of other residents' groups up and down the country. I would like to thank those in the Residents' Associations who went on TV to explain the problems. Whilst the University was proactive in obtaining testing facilities for which they are to be congratulated, they did not work in partnership with the wider community as the Registrar had promised.

As has been set out in this report already we have excellent support from each of our City 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 ensures 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. We are also grateful to the police for their support in enforcing Covid regulations.

ESJF stress that we are not anti-student, but issues of anti-social behaviour, transient noise, litter and car parking are rightly matters of concern.

Resident's Parking Permits

This issue is currently more on the back burner as a result of the pandemic. There are still far too many student cars in the City and this issue will be likely to come to the fore when on-line learning stops and campus is open for tutorials and lectures.

Royal Horticultural Society "It's Your Neighbourhood Scheme"

Again, the pandemic brought a halt to activities. However, for many of us who are lucky enough to have a garden, we were not only able to spend far more time than usual in our gardens, but to take advantage of some early spring sunshine.

.....And finally

SG always welcomes comments and ideas from our 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. I would like to thank everyone who has helped in any way over the past year.

We were unable to hold our annual Have Your Say Meeting – it would not have translated well to Zoom, so here is hoping that it can be arranged for later in the year.

On a personal note, this being my final Annual Report, I would like to thank everyone who has been involved with ESJF over the past three plus years. It has been a privilege to Chair the Exeter St James Forum. I wish my successor every good fortune as they work to ensure the future of ESJF and the Neighbourhood Plan.