

## **Steering Group report for the Exeter St James Forum (ESJF)**

### **Annual General Meeting 2016**

#### **Exeter St James Community Trust Ltd (ESJCT)**

The Trust Board has met on six occasions during the past year and held its first AGM on 21 September 2015 when Di Boston, founding Chair, stood down. Aylwyn Bowen, Robyn Connett and Harry Temple were re-elected and Paul Layton continued as Secretary and Director. Following the AGM Robyn became Chair and Harry Vice-Chair respectively. In March this year the Board was pleased to appoint Prospect Park resident Beth Osment as an additional Director.

Membership of the Trust has grown slowly but steadily and we now number over 220 shareholding members. It is hoped as we become more established that others will choose to join us in our exciting social enterprise to make St James a better place in which to live and work.

Our main focus has been the regeneration of Queen's Crescent Garden and several important milestones have been reached: the granting of consent to change use from private to public open space, the securing of government funds to clear the site and begin restoration of perimeter walls and, at the time of writing, the publication of the compulsory purchase order. Should the latter be uncontested we can anticipate shortly being able to lease the land from Exeter City Council and begin in earnest to realise the community's aspirations for the garden.

In addition negotiations with Network Rail, to take on the lease of the St James Park allotments, continue on behalf of the Forum's Vegetable Gardens Project Group. Although proving to be a lengthy process it is hoped that matters can be satisfactorily concluded before too long. Elsewhere the Trust has been of assistance to the Forum Housing Group in exploring potential opportunities within St James for the acquisition of property for community use.

#### **Planning & Design Panel**

The Planning and Design Panel (PDP) compares planning applications against policies in the Exeter St James Neighbourhood Plan (NP). The PDP advises the Steering Group (SG) on action to take and drafts or helps SG to draft objection or comment to send to City Council (ECC). PDP members discuss applications with developers, consultants, councillors and ECC officers by email, phone or at meetings.

Many applications will be known to ESJF members and most have received planning permission with some amendments due to PDP and ESJF involvement. There follows brief details.

**FOOTBALL CLUB & YEO AND DAVEY SITE DEVELOPMENT:** 320 student beds in up to 6 storey blocks.

Development to fund football ground improvements including new stands on Well Street and St James Road. The development is against several Neighbourhood Plan policies.

The PDP had several meetings with the developers, consultants and council officers which resulted in the developers doing a viability study of different types of accommodation, changing design and layout and making some reductions in the size of the buildings. An objection was made.

Planning permission was granted early 2016. As a result of a letter from the Forum the scheme was put on hold by the Minister at the Department for Communities and Local Government. Eventually the Minister decided to take no further action, saying it was a matter for the local determination. At a joint SG/PDP meeting it was unanimously decided to send Pre-Action Protocol letter to ECC resulting in a meeting with ECC, the developers and the football club on 21<sup>st</sup> June.

**BUS STATION DEVELOPMENT:** Retail and restaurants with cinema, leisure centre and new bus station.

The site is outside the NP area, but the proposed traffic arrangements will effect St James. Paris Street is to be closed and the traffic moved to a one way circulation on King William Street and part of York Road. PDP considered it will greatly increase congestion, particularly queueing at junctions. An objection was made. Planning permission was granted.

**30-32 LONGBROOK STREET:** A six storey block with retail and 25 student rooms on the cleared site next to the King Billy pub.

PDP made suggestions resulting in some changes to the exterior design and expressed concern at the proposed management of the building. Planning permission was granted. The site is now up for sale.

**36-38 WELL STREET, CITY SERVICE STATION:** A 68 student bed development comprising six three storey houses on Well Street with blocks to the rear.

SG sent a detailed objection to the application. Planning officer's report recommends refusal of permission, which will be decided by ECC planning committee on 27<sup>th</sup> June.

#### SMALL PLANNING APPLICATIONS

The PDP's brief is to look at applications against Neighbourhood Plan policies. Most small applications (extensions, minor changes, etc.) are not covered in the NP but PDP members will look at applications and decide if action is appropriate due, perhaps, to being detrimental to the street scene, access or some aspect of the community.

Although many planning applications are outside the PDP brief and NP policies, we would encourage everyone to watch out for applications in their streets and comment, support or object. Find details on the City Council website where you can sign up for a weekly list of applications: <https://exeter.gov.uk/planning-services/permissions-and-applications/weekly-planning-list/>

#### COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE LEVY (CIL)

CIL is money paid by developers to the local council. Most of the levy is spent by the council on infrastructure, such as necessary road alterations, but 15% is put into a fund for local community suggested schemes. The Exeter Community Forum has

been created and has written a strategy and system for allocating grants from the fund. ESJF is a member of the Community Forum.

## JO HAWKINS

At the beginning of 2016, Jo Hawkins stood down as co-ordinator of the panel. PDP members thank her for the large amount of work she did and will miss her skills, knowledge and expertise. We wish her well with her new interests.

The new SG after the AGM will need to appoint a new co-ordinator.

## **The Housing Group**

### PROPERTY

The Housing Group has continued to monitor developments at a property in the area designated in the Neighbourhood Plan as the St James Local Community Hub. This property contains the remains of the ancient holy well of St Sidwell. We are still awaiting publication of its required archaeological report. In 2015 the owners mooted that they would consider leasing the ground-floor retail unit, so we sought advice about whether this would be a viable proposition for ESJF to use as a community space. The two 'townhouses' on the upper floors of the property are presently rented out by the owners *via* Airbnb. In the New Year these 'townhouses' were put on the market but did not sell. The retail space opened as an arts and craft centre run by the owners. Within a matter of a few weeks both it and the 'townhouses' were all on the market. ESJCT, in conjunction with the Housing Group, are investigating the possibility of purchasing or leasing this property and/or its individual components for community use.

### LETTING BOARDS

Letting boards in St James continue to be monitored and estate agents contacted when found to contravene the protocol agreed between the Exeter Estate Agents Association and Exeter City Council, that came into force on 1 September 2014.

## **St Anne's Well pub**

Following the sudden closure of The Wells Tavern pub, amid a number of community concerns, meetings were arranged by Cllr. Keith Owen, between local residents, the brewery and new landlord/landlady, in an attempt to ensure when the pub re-opened it would be with the understanding of residents' desire for a good community pub, reflecting its situation in a quiet neighbourhood. The pub re-opened at the end of 2015 renamed St Anne's Well and good relations are being nurtured between Forum and landlady. However, recognising that the best way to ensure the pub continues to be run as a family-oriented pub should the brewery decide to sell at some future point, ESJF has since successfully nominated the pub as an Asset of Community Value, which means that it cannot be sold without allowing the local community to apply for a 6-month delay whilst they try to raise the money to purchase it themselves.

## **Studentification**

Following a request from Bury Meadow Residents' Association (BMRA), ESJF supported a petition drafted by Chester Community Voice against the

'studentification' of Chester, asking for legislation at national level to ensure local authorities sustainably manage the interests of all parties, not least communities of permanent residents, when considering where student accommodation is developed. The Petition also gained the support of St James Residents' Associations (SJRA) and St David's Neighbourhood Partnership (SDNP). A copy was sent to Ben Bradshaw MP who was present to support Chester's MP Chris Matheson when he presented it to the House of Commons. The 'observations' of the Minister, Brandon Lewis, in response were disappointing.

Meanwhile, Ben Bradshaw invited Christine Fraser of SDNP and Robyn Connett who represented ESJF (having consulted with SJRA reps) to meet with him and Cllr. Keith Owen to discuss the issue of 'studentification' in Exeter and elsewhere, and to stress the need for involvement at a national level. As a result Ben Bradshaw agreed to write to Secretary of State Greg Clark raising points agreed during the meeting including the weight to be given to neighbourhood plans, and in addition to write to MPs of all university cities/towns, with a view to forming an All-Party Working Group to focus on 'studentification'. The response to Ben Bradshaw's letter to the Secretary of State, written by the Minister, Brandon Lewis, was not particularly helpful. Ben Bradshaw has since reported that he has had some encouraging conversations with fellow labour MPs and that after the EU referendum he would pursue his initiative of contacting all MPs of university towns potentially with a view to forming an All-Party Working Group.

Maggie Cartridge of BMRA will be attending the National Conference on University and Community Issues, organised by the National Organisation of Residents' Associations, to be held at Durham University in July, representing both BMRA and ESJF. The conference aims to solve the problems that present themselves at the student-resident interface.

## **St James Vegetable Gardens Society**

### **1. BACKGROUND**

- i) The St James Vegetable Gardens Society (SJVGS) was set up and a committee elected, following a meeting to which all current allotment plot holders were invited in November 2014. It was set up in order to follow up on the Neighbourhood Plan aim "to secure allotments for St James".
- ii) "The Society is part of the St James Community Trust and its Constitution and Rules must not conflict with those of the Trust" (draft memo of agreement between the Trust and the Society Dec 2015).
- iii) In year one the Trust joined the National Allotment Society, in year 2 the Trust asked the Society to renew in its own name.
- iv) Securing the St James Vegetable Gardens site necessitates taking on a single lease from Network Rail to replace the few individual leases currently held. The Trust agreed to do that, in principle, in May 2015.

### **2. ACTIVITY IN 2015/16**

- i) The Society Committee has met 6 times between June 2015 and June 2016, three times specifically to discuss the Network Rail lease, three times for general business.

ii) The Committee currently consists of a Chair, Ruth Stringer; Secretary, Di Boston; Treasurer, Jem Southam; Karen Payne, David Hawkins and, from the Trust Board, Harry Temple.

iii) The Committee created a constitution, set of rules, draft plot agreements and a plot map. We also drafted a budget, measured plots, shared space and paths and set out first thoughts on plot fees. It applied, and received, grants for help with paths and slip/trip hazards and applied to continue as part of the RHS 'Its Your Neighbourhood' scheme.

iv) The Committee sent a formal proposal to the Trust in May 2015 and a draft business plan to Network Rail (NR) at roughly the same time. NR sent a draft lease which was submitted to the National Allotment Society solicitor for comments and a rent for the whole site was agreed with an annual RPI uplift. The Trust nominated a Trust Director to be the link between the two bodies – currently Harry Temple.

v) Network Rail have renewed the railings around the site and undertaken some clearing and felling of self-sown trees.

vi) The SJVGS's first AGM will be on Weds 13<sup>th</sup> July at 6.30 pm in the St James Room at the St Sidwell's Community Centre. Existing and potential plot holders have been invited.

### 3. ISSUES IN 2015/16

i) Water: after receiving a quote from South West Water it was agreed that we could not afford to lay on mains water but, thanks to a chance encounter with a University academic, we have become the first site for Rainshare ([www.rainshare.co.uk](http://www.rainshare.co.uk)), taking rainwater from a nearby house to fill a large water storage tank at the top of the site.

ii) Unkempt plots: When we have a lease from NR we will be able to enforce Society rules about cultivating plots. The current state of these plots is frustrating for current and potential plot holders. The Society Chair has arranged a number of work parties to help clear paths etc.

iii) Insurance: Once we have a lease the Society can arrange its own insurance, currently we are grateful for cover from the Forum's insurance.

iv) The lease/Network Rail: NR have a standard lease, some of the clauses do not apply to our situation, the NR contact in Bristol believes that "there isn't anything there that's going to cause a problem".

v) The Lease/Trust: The Trust has concerns about the standard NR lease, it has also expressed concern, given its own legal status, that the SJVGS is a 'closed shop' – unfortunately the Society cannot widen its membership until the lease is settled. It has been agreed that, in order to demonstrate public benefit, the Society will host an annual public event.

vi) Money/Grants: Thanks to Cllrs Keith and Jill Owen the Society has funds to support the work party activities which include the cost of taking dumped hardcore, tyres and metal to the tip, materials and equipment.

vii) Money/Rents: Until the lease is in place the already existing individual lease holders continue to pay their rents. Plot holders have been given a strong indication of the cost of plots in the future.

#### 4. THE FUTURE

- i) The current priority for the Society is to secure a lease for the site in order to ensure its longevity.
- ii) To secure that lease the relationship between the Society, Trust and Network Rail is of vital importance.
- ii) To date the Society Committee has not had the opportunity to discuss the implications for the SJVGS of the future of the Forum.

#### 5. THANKS

We would like to thank all those who have supported SJVGS in our efforts to secure the plots for St James including Cllrs Jill and Keith Owen, Harry Temple and Rainshare.

#### **Queen's Crescent Garden (QCG)**

This year has seen very encouraging progress towards achieving the community's vision for Queen's Crescent Garden, with a sharing of responsibility for the Project between Exeter St James Forum and Exeter St James Community Trust. The QCG Project remains the Forum's top priority project, but as it is the Trust that will sign a long-term lease for the Garden following compulsory acquisition by the City Council, responsibility for certain aspects of the Project's work now fall to the Trust. For example, planning consent was applied for by the Trust, and granted last July, for Change of Use from Private to Public Open Space, and a rare opportunity to bid for funding, before the ownership issue is settled, was submitted by the Trust.

In collaboration with Exeter City Council as funding partner, this successful bid from the government's Pocket Park Programme saw a whirlwind of activity in the Garden during February and March. The award was used principally for restoration of the wall along York Road and part of Longbrook Street. A planned new entrance was constructed, unexpectedly in this phase, as the old wall was found to be in such poor repair at that point, that demolition and rebuild was deemed necessary. Clearly it would have been foolish to have rebuilt the wall on the existing footprint to be knocked down again in the next phase, but this has had the advantage of giving the first visual sign of an aspect of the Masterplan's anticipated new layout. It has attracted many positive comments, as did the entire restoration work. An element of the award specified for revenue purposes was used to carry out a topographical survey, essential for the next stage of layout construction, and also detailed drawings of the other two new entrances and paths.

The encouragement and support of the community was tremendous, with passers-by offering donations of bricks and money. Match funding which was a key expectation of the Pocket Parks award, was successfully achieved, details of which will be reported at the Trust's AGM. Suffice here to say that the Project Group is very grateful to all who donated either financially or in-kind. To kickstart the Trust's QCG match funding balance, £1300 already raised and held in the Project's Forum account for this purpose was passed to the Trust, alongside £375 donated by John Lewis from its Community Matters green token scheme. This particular donation was

put towards the purchase of a noticeboard for the Garden to raise awareness and understanding of the Project and encourage involvement and further support.

The Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) was finally drafted by Exeter City Council after exhaustive but unsuccessful attempts to discover a legal owner; at time of writing of this report the Order is being advertised with 24 June the closing date for any objection. Hopefully we shall be able to announce at the AGM whether the CPO is to be confirmed uncontested, or, should anyone have come forward with a serious claim, whether negotiations prior to possible Public Inquiry will be needed.

Four volunteer teams of mowers have continued this year to keep the grass cut and the University's Environment Society Student Community Volunteers as well as working parties of resident volunteers and individuals have helped in practical ways. Each child of St Sidwell's School planted and monitored a daffodil bulb in the Queen's Crescent border and families involved in the School's Gardening Club have planted up two planters at the new entrance and will be maintaining them over the summer. Some members of the Project Group have been very generous in the time given to practical tasks and are continuing to deal with the various piles of materials left at the end of the Project Park work.

Situated in St James Community Hub, it is anticipated that the Garden will be used in many different ways to benefit the community. Last summer La La Community Choir held an open air rehearsal in the Garden using the acoustic properties of the large canopy of the weeping ash! An appreciative audience of local residents gathered to enjoy the singing on a lovely sunny evening.

At time of writing we look forward to the opportunity for local residents and other supporters of Queen's Crescent Garden to come together to celebrate the improvements achieved this year. 'Tea in the Park' promises to be a happy event with the choir of St Sidwell's Primary School coming along to sing songs about outdoors, insects and sunshine, the appearance of Little Owl, Theia, face painting and henna painting by associate members from The Mosque, as well as various stalls – and, of course, tea and cake!

A number of trees have succumbed during the year to high winds and have had to be felled when Devon County Council's Tree Officers have inspected and deemed them hazardous to the Highway. Exeter City Council's tree surgeons, Devon Tree Services, kindly offered to remove a large hanging branch from another tree presenting a hazard within the Garden, as a gesture of support for the Project. Until the lease has been signed for QCG we have been advised not to accept responsibility for this kind of essential work, so we are very grateful to Cllrs. Keith and Jill Owen for coordinating the action and sourcing the funding required. A Tree Survey will be required at an early stage of the delivery of the Masterplan, and it is still hoped that the best trees will be fit for retention, with other trees planted to replace those that are felled to ensure future generations have beautiful trees to enjoy.

For the previous three years, Queen's Crescent Garden has taken part in the Royal Horticultural Society's 'It's Your Neighbourhood' Scheme. An assessor has visited the Garden each July and as well as giving advice has assessed the Garden against

three sets of criteria, with community participation taking priority. Being a project inspired and run by the community for the community and drawing in ever more individuals, groups, organisations and businesses, for help and support, it always scores highly in that category. The other two categories are environmental responsibility and gardening achievement. Last July the Garden was assessed at the second to highest level – that of 'Thriving'! With the help of all our supporters we shall be aiming one day for 'Outstanding'!

### **The Joint Strategic Group**

Since David Treharne became the member of the Steering Group attending these meetings, it has met once, and plans for a summer meeting have been riven with difficulties and at the time of writing a date had not been finalised. The one meeting that he has attended was mainly concerned with issues of “studentification” and the salient points were as follows;

- Fresher’s week 2015 had, apart from isolated reports of rowdy behaviour, seen an improvement in the way it was managed and carried out.
- The University authorities are well aware of the growing pressure on accommodation in and around the area of the campus, and especially in St James. It has plans (though few details were revealed) to have accommodation for 900 students on campus. There has also been discussion about how the student population could be more widely distributed throughout other areas of the City. Clearly, proximity to the campus is an important issue when students make accommodation choices.
- There was embryonic discussion around the report commissioned by Richard Short for Exeter City Council and carried out by Professor Darren Smith of Loughborough University entitled “The options and implications of accommodating the future growth of students in Exeter” and it is hoped that this document will form a substantive part of the next meeting.
- It was agreed that the current system of Community Wardens had had the effect of improving communications between students and residents.

David believes that continuity in representation is a key factor in improving this partnership.

### **About St James**

We have now produced and distributed three issues of our newsletter *About St James*. These went out in May and September 2015 and at the end of April 2016. The intention has been to produce two issues a year.

The aim of this newsletter has been to inform residents about neighbourhood concerns, to report progress being made on dealing with the various issues taken on by the St James Forum and Trust and to give space to events held across the community, which reflect the spirit and energy of our area. Contributions have been made by members of the Steering Group, representatives from the Residents’ Associations and the University.

*About St. James* has been supported by a small number of local businesses which buy advertising space in these newsletters and on the Forum’s website. The



publication has been delivered to all properties within the area covered by the Neighbourhood Plan. Three members of the Forum have been key in the production of the newsletter, taking responsibility for graphic design, editing, and advertising. A team of volunteers from the Steering Group and Residents' Associations has undertaken door to door delivery.

### **Advertising**

Six advertisements were sold this year at £50 each = £300. Rusty Bike, Gillams, Harry's and Maximum Motors have all renewed. St. Anne's Well and Saunders Convenience Store are our new advertisers.

### **RHS Its Your Neighbourhood**

St James Village has been entered. Judging takes place on July 4th – three different sites chosen this year: St James Railway Station, Queen's Crescent Garden and St Sidwell Centre. The route is being finalised.

'It's Your Neighbourhood' judging takes place a week or so later for the other sites. The plan for next year would be to involve St Sidwell's School and hopefully get more together on that well in advance.