

February 2024 Report - Emily O'Brien, District Councillor

It's a busy time at LDC including budget setting which is extremely challenging for councils up and down the country, with ever reduced funding at a time of growing need for services including growing bills for temporary and emergency accommodation due to lack of social housing and currently an acute lack of private rented accommodation. We have committed to building further council housing as part of our new local plan and are also lobbying for a better system for these payments which are currently gouging holes in many budgets. Despite these difficulties we agreed a balanced budget at the most recent cabinet meeting, to go to our next full council meeting.

We are also having the biggest changes to bin collections ever, with Ringmer (bar two houses – which will be contacted individually) largely in phase one beginning 26th February. The parish council will have full information separately but in short we are rolling out wheelie bins changing collection days. Information at <https://www.lewes-eastbourne.gov.uk/wheeliebins> and thank you in advance for helping to reassure people and spread the word.

The Local plan is also a key moment and has particular significance for Ringmer, which has borne the brunt of so much speculative development recently & which clearly many developers have their eyes on for more. I have been very busy talking to residents, and the roadshow and (which is something I pushed for) was really successful in showing local people what is currently at stake, so I'm pleased so many attended. I'm grateful to the parish council and to RAGE for helping spread the word about this. In response to feedback from residents which I and other local councillors received, we requested an extension to the consultation period, and I'm pleased this was granted until 19th Feb to allow for further responses.

I understand and share residents' concerns and frustration, and indeed wider frustrations about our broken planning system, which has ridden roughshod over the 2016 Lewes district local plan which should have lasted for 20 years, and not put us in the position of needing to redraw a local plan whatsoever. We are supposed to have a 'plan-led' system yet often it feels like every obstacle is put in the way of having one – to the great joy of the volume housebuilders.

My main message is that it's really important to respond to the consultation. Parish councillors will be aware that LDC have to follow all government processes including issuing a call for sites and thoroughly assessing what comes in. However, what is being shared currently is very much a developer's wish list. It's not a draft plan, it's the raw material for one, and that's why it's important to put your views, and I'm certainly involved in doing that myself as your district councillor.

As well as sites the plan consults on policies and I'm encouraging people to respond to some of these including policies which could help ensure our district gets the housing it needs in the right places while minimising environmental damage. For example, a policy requiring solar panels on new developments. There are also groundbreaking policies on water quality. I've personally campaigned very hard on the issue of raw sewage discharge into local rivers via storm overflows, and the connection with development, and Lewes District Council was the first council in the country to start questioning the water companies over the link between the two as part of the planning system. Getting this right, I believe, should in itself act as something of a brake.

Also, a proposed policy that on new housing developments at least half of the new houses should be 2 bedroom – which the evidence shows is what we need as opposed to the 3-4 bedroom executive homes beloved by big developers. I imagine will be a real barrier to some of the worst kinds of development as it is asking developers to produce the housing we need, not the housing that makes them the most profit. I expect developers will be queuing up to say they don't think this should be in the plan so hoping that the parish council and others will support this.

ITEM 7.

I also had a briefing yesterday to clarify the process regarding infrastructure as I'd had several questions and enquiries about how this works and why isn't there more clarity about infrastructure needs. My main takeaway was that we are simply not at that point yet, as the bulk of developing the infrastructure delivery plan that accompanies a new local plan starts once the sites have been allocated, as you'd expect, however there is some preparatory work going on to help speed things up.

In terms of the process, the planning policy team will take a place-based approach. This means going to each infrastructure provider (water, sewage, power, schools, NHS etc) with any sites that may potentially be in the local plan to ask what infrastructure would be needed should they be included. I've clarified that those providers will also be given info about sites that have already been given permission outside of the last local plan process e.g. through appeals, as I believe it's incredibly important that any infrastructure conversations also fully include and recognise the existing deficit as a starting point.

Once the planning policy team have that basic info from the providers they will share the whole list of needs with parish and town councils for feedback and also so you can share info about any gaps or deficits i.e. with the aim of capturing local knowledge. This will take place before the draft plan is agreed/issued so it informs it. You are welcome to feed in any information meanwhile but if short of time the key thing will be to comments at this point in the process.

I've also been busy on general ward issues e.g. liaising with a resident in relation to the Bovis (Vistry) development in a dispute around an existing boundary hedge in an effort to resolve this before management is handed over away from Bovis. Also, a bin query, with two bins which have been kindly provided and emptied for many years on the footpath which runs along Chamberlains Lane now being taken over by the district council. I've also followed up around LDC housing stock, including a progress update on 34/26 Broyle Close which has moved frustratingly slowly and I'd had numerous queries about, and which I'm pleased to confirm has been allocated to a family with a disabled son and is being adapted to meet their specific needs prior to them moving in. The reason for delay is the time for funding to be secured as extensive adaptations are required. I circulated an update separately with more detail.

I've also met with the county council officers and residents regarding the flooding to gardens which has taken place on Mill Road, following the independent report which the county council commissioned. The only acceptable 'answer' to this as far as both residents and ESCC are concerned is to install land drains at the bottom of the gardens, paid for by the developer, however this proposal unfortunately stalled as Southern Water initially refused to allow connection. After we met, the county council then went back to Southern Water and this does now seem to be progressing. The county council have commissioned a design for a scheme so I'm cautiously optimistic though still keeping my fingers tightly crossed.