

Chairman's report Grange Park Parish Council 7/4/03

As this is the first such report since the formation of Grange Park Parish, I thought it was an ideal opportunity to start by summarising how we got to where we are now. Whilst for some this will be covering old ground it will hopefully be of benefit to the wider audience in our Parish.

Grange Park was first conceived in the early 90's but it took until 1998 to finalise plans for the earlier phases of development in the village. The Section 106 planning agreement dated 8/5/98 represented the agreement between all interested parties including the various owners of the land now comprising GP. The original planning consents provided for the construction of around 1000 houses.

In this agreement there was also provision for a body of people drawn together to reflect the broad interests represented in the development of Grange Park. This included the Developers, original land owners, SNC Planning and Development representatives and various SNC Councillors. This body was called The Grange Park Foundation. Since inception it has played a key role in shaping the Village we now see. In the last nine months, the Parish has been represented at their monthly meetings. I have evidenced first hand the excellent work which balanced so well the commercial desires against the interests of the Village. Officially wound up at the end of March, I am particularly keen to ensure that we are not 'abandoned' and that a replacement body is formed to protect our ongoing interests, as soon as possible. In this respect I know we have our District Councillors support.

The efforts of the Foundation were recognised recently in an award from the East Midlands Branch of the Royal Town Planning Institute for Racial Equality/Social Inclusion.

Also included under the original agreement are the provision of a primary school and multi use games area, a community centre, sports pitches and pavilion, country parks, play areas, a district centre and a number of open spaces and greenways. In addition an endowment fund of around £1.5m was provided, the interest on which was intended to contribute toward the up keep of the Village. In view of the timescales for development, any sums payable to provide the various facilities were index linked. Unfortunately, due to reasons that have yet to be satisfactorily explained, community funds were linked to RPI unlike the school which more appropriately was linked to the building industry index. As RPI has been much lower than the latter index the value of the endowment was significantly eroded leaving less money available-more on this later. The problem has been compounded by falling interest rates. As a result to protect the capital sum, like this year we will be faced with tough decisions when setting the precept.

In the autumn of 2001 Grange Park Community Development Forum was formed pending formation of the Parish. The Forum did an excellent job in representing the community on a number of fronts and some of their structure and indeed members carried forward into the Parish.

In December 2001 a secondary S106 agreement was signed encompassing plans for the District Centre, the provision of a bowling green at the community centre and funding for the Arts project. In summary this project is a unique opportunity to involve art in the ongoing development of Grange Park. As we have heard Anna Hayward-SNC's Arts Development Officer has engaged artists to work with the community in assessing the opportunities to incorporate Art into the Village. We have yet to see the fruits of their labours. I am particularly keen to see how the project is intending to assist with lighting the greenways and open space, which are currently unlit and unwelcoming at night. I hope a great deal can be achieved from this unique opportunity.

On 28/1/02 by order of the Secretary Of State, a new parish was formed, taking lands that had previously been part of both Quinton and Courteenhall parishes. On April 18th 2002, the Parish Council came together and held its first meeting with six councillors. Within a few weeks one of those had resigned and three new councillors were co-opted giving the maximum number currently agreed of eight. I was duly elected Chairman and Councillor Denise Hutt was elected to act as Vice Chair. Of the eight councillors, only two had any previous experience in Parish matters. I am pleased to say that whatever they may have lacked in knowledge was largely compensated for by their enthusiasm. Looking back, I don't think anyone of us really appreciated the extent of the work involved. The formation of a brand new Parish is quite uncommon. At nearly every step of the way, we had no precedent and had to pretty much start from scratch. This together with a lack of experience has provided a great challenge. In February we said good bye to Cllr Michael Penn

who moved out of the area and this month welcomed Cllr Christine Mcclennan. Michael played an important role in both the Forum and then the Parish. He could be relied upon for his strong views on a number of subjects.

It is at this point that I think it important to note that at the time of writing the Parish does not yet own or control any of the land or assets within the village. For this reason it is currently very difficult for us to resolve any problems. Often the best we can do is to request that the appropriate body or authority address the issue. It will be some years before all elements have been transferred to the Parish. Similarly, until the land is formally adopted, the authorities, like the Parish have no power to address issues such as speeding and poor parking. This position will improve over time. As areas of open space and greenways are completed, they enter into a one year maintenance period with the developer. At the end of this year, SNC will take a transfer and simultaneously transfer to the Parish, but only once they are completely satisfied that it is to standard. We have already seen evidence of this control working for us, with the first areas of open space, which were rejected and remain with the developers for a further year until in a satisfactory condition.

As a Parish we have a statutory right to be consulted on any planning matters affecting the village. I stress the word consulted as under current arrangements we merely make observations and have no power to insist on our observations being adopted.

A good example of this was seen with the Waste Handling application. Despite strong opposition from SNC (encompassing Parish objections) and the affected residential areas, the application was passed. This highlighted the fact that planning is nothing to do with the usual 'NIMBY' approach and the emotion attached thereto, but wholly factually based on strict planning and policy issues.

This last year, we have seen a number of major applications for developments in the village. These have included two hotels and a restaurant, numerous versions of housing schemes, most of which have yet to be started; the District Centre, now in its third reincarnation and a massive Ikea store.

The hotels and restaurant are almost complete. The District Centre is due to start shortly and will hopefully be completed in Autumn 2004. This development looks impressive and will be a major asset and focus for the village. It will encompass numerous smaller shop units, a supermarket, public library, a separate doctors surgery and dispensary and a commercially run nursery. I believe that the library will include provision for police representation. I am hopeful that we will see more input from the police in the next year, not least with the Neighbourhood Watch scheme which for a number of reasons has stalled. Although it is acknowledged that the Police are stretched, there is a consensus that the interests of Grange Park are not being fully provided for. We are already seeing elements of our youth providing unwelcome attention at the Community Centre and nearby play areas. I hope this will improve as more of the amenity in the village comes on line.

As for Ikea, the application is on hold pending completion of consultation with Highways, NBC and the Environment Agency. In view of the impact on the village, the Council will continue representing strong objections to the application.

As many of you know, our Primary School, Woodland View, thanks to the efforts of all concerned, opened in September last year (just). I have been directly involved with another school in very similar circumstances. It is unfortunate that common sense does not prevail and provide for a school of the right size from the off. The extra cost and more importantly, inconvenience that is now being suffered could be avoided. When will they learn. Anyway, Mark, his team and the Governors are doing an excellent job and are rightly at the heart of our Village community. We have already forged strong links and will continue to work in partnership for the common good. This partnership has been evidenced recently over an agreement to operate the MUGA. A representative of the LEA was heard to say how well we had done in coming to an agreement so quickly - testament to our joint success. I would also like to thank the school for the support it has provided to other users, including the Parish, whilst the much delayed Community Centre has been built.

One of my big concerns for the village is what development will take place on those sites yet to be sold. Ikea highlights how much of a threat this can be to our community. There are two northern sites as yet without any formal development plans. I believe it was always intended that the further away from the M1 the smaller the industrial impact would be. I personally hope there will be smaller, less imposing office units as anything else would have a damaging impact aesthetically.

From the inception of Grange Park, community development was seen to be of key importance for a brand new village and to reflect this, the plans included the appointment of a Community Development Worker. The primary objective of this role was to “inform and engage with the emerging Grange Park community”. The strategy in the first year of appointment is to understand the needs of the community, develop community structures and assist with grant aid applications. Vanda Goodship was appointed in September to fulfil this role and whilst having no previous experience of such a role she has been fully committed, working more than her contracted hours.

The first six months were largely spent ‘building bridges’ and successfully completing the Grange Park Community Leisure Survey. The results of this survey will play a key part in driving the direction of this important project. As part of this role Vanda has played a key role in the Youth and Sport committee. She has played a key role in the formation of the Youth Club and has invested a lot of time in preparatory work for both a skatepark facility and youth shelter. There is a long way to go but thanks for your hard work so far.

The youth have a key part to play in our community. I am keen to ensure that they take some ownership of their issues. Although it is unfair to penalise the majority for the acts of the few, I would personally be wary of investing significant sums in Youth projects whilst some appear intent on destroying what has already been provided. As one of our former Councillors said, “what will they give in return for this investment?” For me it is to do their best to ensure that their peers look after what is provided.

The long awaited completion of the community centre is getting nearer by the day. Despite ongoing niggles about the lighting rig this is a fantastic facility. It will provide a much needed focus for the community as well as an administrative base for the Council and Vanda. The office will be manned on a part time basis, initially to fit in with the hours of our clerk. We will also be holding all Council meetings there. It is the current intention for committee meetings to be open to the public which will hopefully be advantages overall. We also hope to use the building to display information about the village including plans for future development. I would like to see the main Parish notice board located outside the building. There is a great deal of interest from potential users and we are naturally keen to see this facility used as much as possible.

So what are some of the other challenges for the next year? I have already mentioned a few earlier in this report.

At the Youth and Sport meeting we have talked at great length about what we would like to see provided for the youth. This forum has been supported by two members of our youth-David Bateman and Alison Saunders. The ongoing work of this group was recently recognised by an “Unsung heroes award” from Northamptonshire Police. Well done to both of them and keep it up!

In the next year we will need to start working on our plans for a changing facility at Foxfield, including provision for car parking. Due to reasons mentioned above, apart from the ring fenced sum of £50k, there is currently no funding available for this project. Earlier indications suggested that the cost of building this facility to the required standards would be £3-500k. The developers have been approached for support (in view of the increased number of houses permitted) but have not yet been forthcoming. If necessary we will have to apply for Lottery funding but I believe available funds are reducing and we are not considered a priority area. It also takes a great deal of time and effort to put an application together.

Other issues to be addressed include dog fouling, litter, buses (routes, types, stops) road safety. In view of the sheer number of issues to tackle, we have started to look at the possibility of increasing the number of Councillors from 8 to 12. Whilst getting the Order is fairly straight forward, the challenge comes in finding like-minded, public spirited individuals, willing to give the necessary commitment. If you are such a person then please let us know.

Communication is a key part of parish work. We have so far issued two quarterly newsletters with another due in the next month or so. In addition we have our own web site which also provides a link for people to email the Council. From the feedback I have seen, both have been well received and will continue to be developed over coming months.

Now for the “thank you’s”. During the last year we have had three clerks. Firstly John Wood from SNC, who guided us through the early stages of formation. Then Caroline Ewin stepped in as clerk in July pending us finding a more permanent solution. Her years of experience helped us greatly. In December. we appointed

our current clerk, Jas Meadows. Although you wouldn't know it, Jas had no previous experience of clerking. She nevertheless has given her full commitment to the role and has consistently given more than we asked for and expected. With completion of recent training her confidence continues to grow, and I am pleased to say that she is an asset to the Parish. Well done and thanks.

Now for the Councillors. Everyone has made a significant contribution to the Council in the last year and for that I thank you. I would particularly like to thank the chairs of the sub committees, notably Cllr Tony Walker who has kindly represented the Parish when I was not able to do.

I would also like to thank our District Councillors-George Smith and Sally Townsend who continue to provide valuable support to the Council and our community. I look forward to continuation of a successful partnership following the elections.

I view this last year as an induction (some may call it a rude awakening!). In my opinion we need to build on the good work we have done and be more focussed and efficient in our approach looking forward. "Smarter not harder"

Finally, when people ask me "what do I do as a Parish Councillor?" When I tell them what we have had to deal with, they often say "so how much do you get paid for doing all that". When I tell them we gain no financial benefit they then ask "why do I do it?" The answer is "because I enjoy it, because I find it rewarding and because if I didn't do it who would?" Unfortunately the enjoyment has recently been taken away. Whether this was deliberate intent or not, I sincerely hope that those issues have now been put behind us so that we can again move forward as a team working hard for our community.

I look forward to the next year and the challenges that lie ahead.

Martin Smith

Chairman

Grange Park Parish Council

8/4/03