



Notes of Meeting			
Subject:	HIGHBARN RESIDENTS GROUP MEETING		
Date:	22nd March 2011	Time:	18:30hrs
Location:	Gade Room, Civic Centre		
Attendees:	DBC :- Steve Baker (SB) (Chair) James Doe (JD) Jenny Young (JY) Andrew Williams (AW) (Leader of the Council) Cllr Stephen Holmes Cllr Terry Douris HCC :- Dave Bowman – Herts Highways Nash Mills Parish Council:-- Cllr Terence Collins (Nash Mills Parish Council) Residents :- Richard Taylor (RT) Jennifer Taylor (JT) Michelle Berkley (MB) Rodney Berkley(RB) Lisa Bayley (LB) Carly Simon (CS) Tracy Gill (TG) Heidi Cutts (HC) Andy Price (AP)		
Apologies	Les Berry (former resident)		

1. Welcome & Introductions

Introductions were made and those who were new to the group were welcomed.

2. Update on the Funding Application

SB – reminded the group that when the Council’s application for funding was submitted on 18th October 2010, we did not know what effect the government’s “Comprehensive Spending Review” would have on the budgets of local authorities and other publicly funded public bodies such as the HCA. The Council has recently received written confirmation as to how the CSR will specifically affect the HCA’s Land Stabilisation Programme. It has been confirmed by the HCA and the CLG that funding would only be available for those projects which had already been approved by the HCA and that no further funding would be made available out of the LSP for those projects, such as Highbarns, which had not yet been approved. This decision by the CLG left three projects in “limbo”: Troon (Cornwall), Hatfield and Highbarns. The projects were ranked

according to their priority by the HCA, Cornwall being deemed the highest priority, Highbarns second and Hatfield third.

The HCA looked to see if the three outstanding projects could be funded using savings on the other projects in the LSP. The HCA were able to find sufficient savings, mainly from an underspend on the Bath project, to fund Troon, but the savings were insufficient to fund Highbarns and Hatfield. The government have asked the HCA to try to identify savings from their Property and Regeneration budget and to utilise these to fund Highbarns and Hatfield. As Highbarns has priority over Hatfield any savings which are identified will be directed to Highbarns first. Unfortunately, the HCA cannot give any guarantee when, or if, the funding will become available.

David Keeton at the HCA has confirmed that he has been instructed to complete the appraisal of the Council's application to determine whether the Highbarns project is eligible for funding. Once the appraisal is complete David Keeton will advise the Council of the outcome.

TC – asked what proportion of the project costs were we expecting to receive.

SB – confirmed that the project cost was estimated at £2.7m including a contingency element, and that the Council would be looking to receive funding for the full cost of the project. It was anticipated that any funding we received would be given in phases as when the savings were identified, rather than a lump sum.

TC – asked what the timescale was for receiving the funding.

SB – the HCA had given no indication of when the funding might be available. They have not committed to a timescale.

TC – asked if work could commence as soon as funds were made available

SB – work could commence but it may be stop/start in nature if the money were to come through in stages

AP – asked when we would know if we officially qualify for funding

SB – the HCA had not committed themselves to a date

AP – asked why it was so difficult to meet the criteria

SB – stressed that the HCA's criteria for assessing criteria had not changed. What had changed is that the HCA would have to find the funds from a different budget.

TG – asked why the HCA were already looking for money for this project, if they still hadn't decided if we qualified for it.

SB – did not expect it would take very long for the HCA to make the decision of whether we qualified but they were anticipating that we would qualify.

AP – at the last meeting (in February) it was expected that we would have a decision by now

SB – whilst there was uncertainty over funding, David Keeton had explained that he had been asked to put a hold on the Highbarns project. He had reached a certain stage and then had to stop. He had now been told to complete the appraisal.

MB – asked if this meant we would definitely get funding

SB – we have received no guarantee from the HCA that we will get any funding

RB – asked if the Cornwall project had been approved

SB – believed it had, as the funds had been allocated to them.

TG – asked how the projects were ranked by the HCA?

SB – it was a risk based assessment, taking environmental impact into account. As the Cornwall site had several properties standing empty, the village centre was becoming deserted.

CS – asked if there was a time-line for this stage of work, as there was an “expiry date” on some items in the initial risk assessment. He was concerned that we would end up going through the whole process again.

SB – the area was constantly being monitored and re-assessed as part of the ongoing risk assessment.

MB – asked about physical monitoring of the site, as they had seen nothing happening

JD – confirmed that visual inspections were happening regularly in the area.

RB – suggested that the physical risk-assessment of the site needed to be re-done

SB – the project risk register was regularly reviewed by our officer group

CS – asked if particular properties that were known to have problems would be prioritised when work began

SB – understood that that would be the case, as the higher risk areas would need priority treatment

TD – asked what would happen if another project entered the scheme, which was deemed a higher priority than ours. Would they “leapfrog” us for the money?

SB – the CLG have made clear on their website that no further funding will be made available for new applications after 31st March 2011, when there would be a presumption that local authorities would be liable to fund remediation projects themselves. The CLG would only support future projects in exceptional circumstances. As the HCA had been asked by the CLG to find funds for us from savings on other budgets, we had some degree of protection.

LB – asked what would happen if no savings could be made by the HCA

SB – if we were offered no funding then we would have to report this to the councillors and for consideration of all the options. It would be a matter for the Members.

TG – commented that our application took a long time to submit and asked if we would still be in this position had it gone in sooner

RB – thought that the submission of the report had been poorly timed. Asked what we were doing as a council with regards to putting pressure on the CLG and lobbying the Treasury/Central Government.

SB – on RB's first point, he could not comment on the issues leading up to the submission of our application, as he was not involved in the project at that stage. On RB's second point, he could confirm that the Leader of the Council had written a strongly worded letter to Eric Pickles, the Secretary of State for CLG with regards to the funding situation. The CLG had replied to clarify the funding position, which is why the meeting was being held today to share this with residents.

AW – said that he was happy to provide copies of his letter to Eric Pickles to residents. The response had come from a senior minister. All of the available information had been passed to Mike Penning MP so he could take it up with Bob Neill MP (Parliamentary Under Secretary of State). As this work was not affordable at a local level, we would need to meet with them if the HCA's savings were not achieved.

RB – asked what the time-line would be

AW – We would expect a reasonable timescale for a response on whether these savings are being made. We may have to push CLG to look at other alternatives

CS – asked what Mike Penning was doing to help move things along. She thought it would be beneficial for him to attend the next residents' meeting if he was supposed to be helping them.

TD – reminded residents that Mike had previously visited the site and spoken to householders

SB – said that Mike had asked for a full briefing note on the current funding situation when the decision from CLG had come through and was actively working on their behalf. SB had supplied Mike with a briefing note.

CS – said that if they never saw him, then the work he was doing for them was just "hearsay"

AW – emphasised that Mike does understand how concerned residents are and has made it clear that we need to resolve the issue and look at all the options.

LB – requested a time-line for this to be resolved

AW – re-iterated that the HCA were giving no guarantees on how long this would take

RB – asked that we start looking at the alternative options now, because of the risks involved

LB – People are scared for the safety of their children

RB – felt that we could not wait for the Government

AW – stressed that councils were not set up to deal with these types of incidents and that this work needs to be funded by central government

LB – said that this could not be the only way to fund the project. Asked how long the residents in Cornwall had been waiting for their funding

SB – thought that the Cornwall project had been going on for around 10 years. Reminded people that the areas of highest risk had already been treated.

CS – said that it would be good to know which properties were definitely at risk, as people need to be aware of this

TC – said he had attended this meeting 3 years ago and asked then what the Plan B was, and was told then that there wasn't one. As he was representing the local residents, he felt that DBC should be looking for other funding.

LB – asked why DBC could not pay for the works and then get the money back when the funding eventually came through. They were concerned that some areas on the initial report said "critical". They were concerned about repeated water leaks in the area and were worried that water may be leaking into the chalk mines

SB – the Council had always made clear from the outset that the remedial work had been dependent on funding being available from the HCA.

RB – felt that DBC were using the HCA to shield themselves from criticism.

LB – said that they wanted to hear that the project had been assessed and know when the funds would be coming through.

SB – the initial feedback from the HCA to the application had been positive. The only possible question mark raised at the time was whether the 50% top-up would be available from the CLG. We were told that our application fitted the bill and, on the face of it, was likely to pass the appraisal test. We were not made aware until this year that our application had been put on hold. We can push the HCA for a timescale, but we have no control over them.

AW – DBC were trying to be open and honest with residents, sharing information with them even when it was not good news.

LB – asked what Plan B was with the HCA

AW – said that we could ask the HCA these questions. We were not trying to cover anything up, but were trying to work with residents.

TG – asked whether residents from the other 40 or so houses had been told this yet.

SB – said we had waited as we wanted to discuss it with the residents group first and decide if another public meeting would be appropriate.

AP – asked if we had 50% of the funding in place

SB – explained that it was not and clarified the funding situation

AP – asked if there was anything the Council could do to minimise the risks/threats in the area and thereby reduce the amount of worry and anxiety felt by residents

LB – said that the fact they did not know what was going on underneath their houses was very frightening

SB – reminded residents that additional investigations and monitoring would be expensive

LB – commented that you could not place a value on human life

SB – offered to speak with Hyder to see if they could recommend a study that would hopefully bring some reassurance to residents whilst we are going through the funding process

JD – re-iterated that the area was under constant review and was inspected regularly

TD – said there was a real feeling of blight in the area, with no clear way forward. He felt that the Council should develop a “financial Plan B” which explored the various options open to us.

RB – commented that with all the government spending cuts currently being made, he felt it was unlikely that any efficiency savings made by the HCA would be passed onto us. They may end up being used to meet the cuts that the HCA would be required to make next year. He also felt that the Council should be formulating a Plan B as it had a responsibility to its residents and could not “hide its responsibility”.

SB – said that we officers could discuss all the options with Members informally, but not as a formal process at this stage, whilst we are still going through the HCA funding route and still awaiting the outcome. We can also press the HCA further for some timescales. The minutes of this meeting would be passed to Mike Penning and he would be invited to attend a future meeting of this group.

TC – asked what the other possible sources of funding were

SB – confirmed that there are no other grants/funding available to us other than the one we are already pursuing with the HCA/CLG.

TG – commented that our government could afford to send troops to Libya, but could not address a public safety issue.

AW – said it was a long, frustrating bureaucratic process, and it was a shock to him to learn recently that the funding have not been made available to us.

RB – asked if there was anything that residents could do to help this process along

AW – suggested that residents could write individually to Mike Penning

RT – asked if the Council could provide a list of contacts/addresses for residents to direct their letters to

AW – said that Eric Pickles at the CLG would be the key person in government to write to

JY – offered to send a list of contacts addresses and a summary of key timescales for the project to the Residents Group to assist them with their letters

AW – said that the “human element” of residents letters would add the detail of the effects of the chalk mines that he was unable to give

MB – asked whether any press involvement would be beneficial in highlighting the cause

AW – said that he did not feel this would help matters, but he could not prevent them doing so if they chose. He offered to outline the issues raised this evening to the HCA and to call a meeting for residents once we had some more answers.

TG – said there was no point having a big meeting if there was nothing more to say

HC – asked how far up the chain they could go with their letters

AW – confirmed that Eric Pickles was the responsible cabinet member, and the most senior person at the CLG

RB – suggested writing to the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer

TC – said that Nash Mills Parish Council would also be writing letters on behalf of residents

3.Highways Issues

MB – asked DB for an update of the issue of the additional road markings requested for the junctions of Meadow Road/Highbarns.

DB – said that as the marking cost £500-£600 each, they tried to do 2 or 3 jobs on one order to save money. He anticipated that the work would be completed by June or July.

TG – raised safety concerns about the state of the roads in the area. She has had problems with her 3-wheeled buggy getting stuck in pot-holes as she steps off the pavement.

DB – said he would visit the site and look at the condition of the roads.

4.Time and Date of Next Meeting

SB – concluded by saying that we would call a further meeting when we had more information from the HCA. He confirmed that we would write to other residents in the area immediately to update them.