
CHESTERFIELD & DISTRICT CIVIC SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER

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Campaigning to make Chesterfield a better place to live



TOBY PERKINS MP SPEAKS AT PACKED PUBLIC MEETING ON EAST–WEST CYCLE ROUTE

THE public meeting called by the Civic Society on 11 November at Brookfield School to discuss the proposed East–West Walking and Cycling Route was attended by at least 250 people. It was probably the largest event of its kind held in Chesterfield for some years and also the biggest meeting ever convened by the Civic Society, at least since its early campaign against the scheme to build over the Market Place.

We were very pleased to welcome Toby Perkins MP as the main speaker, who set out his own views by way of introduction.

The majority of speakers from the audience expressed opposition to the

Chatsworth Road section of the route and support for the alternative route between Greendale Avenue and Somersall Lane. Several also urged that Crow Lane be reopened to motor traffic.

Every opportunity was given to those who wished to speak in favour of the scheme, whose views were heard with respect. A statement was also made by some of the landowners whose property would be affected by the building of the Greendale Avenue route.

On a show of hands it was clear that most people present had not received the circular which the county council has claimed was distributed to 4,041 households on 117 streets advertising the consultation on the proposals last March. This confirms the evidence the Civic Society has collected more systematically from residents of over twenty of those streets, at both the western and eastern ends of the route, who

have stated that they did not receive the circular. In particular, it is now clear beyond reasonable doubt it was not delivered to residents of Chatsworth Road, and the roads leading off it.

A vote was taken on the Chatsworth Road route and a large majority were opposed to the proposal. A smaller majority of those present and voting wished to see Crow Lane reopened to motor traffic.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

As Mr Perkins stressed at the meeting, the county council is entitled to proceed with the scheme as proposed, despite the very strong opposition from local residents, as long it does not break the law in doing so.

All the evidence available at present suggests that this is what the county council intends to do. Individual objectors who have written courteous, carefully argued letters to the cabinet member concerned, County Councillor Athwal, have received a common-form email from an officer making general points and failing to rebut the specific argument set out by the writer of the letter.

This the county council is also free to do, although the tactic is unlikely to do the Conservative Party any favours in future local elections. It was noticeable that no Conservative county councillor attended the meeting on 11 November and a Conservative district councillor who was present indicated that he did not wish to speak.

Since the meeting Mr Perkins, accompanied by County Councillor Paul Niblock, the Liberal Democrat member for the division which includes the Chatsworth Road section of the route, have met County Councillor Athwal, who is understood to have refused to make any concessions to the widely expressed opposition to the scheme.

In these circumstances it is difficult to differ from the view expressed in the latest issue of the Liberal Democrat *Focus* news-sheet for the division that the Conservative-controlled county council appears determined to treat the taxpayers of Chesterfield with contempt.

A few days before the public meeting Mr Perkins raised the scheme in a Westminster Hall exchange with a Transport Department Minister. The Minister invited Mr Perkins to arrange a meeting with the Minister directly concerned with cycling policy, Chris Heaton-Harris, which he has since done. We do not as yet know the outcome of that meeting.

The Civic Society has taken up one specific point since the meeting on 11 November — why negotiations with landowners on the Greendale Avenue route were allowed to break down. The society asked the county council (under the Freedom of Information Act) whether in the course of those negotiations the advice of the Department for Transport was sought or obtained to overcome any problems that had arisen.

The answer received was that no approach was made to the Department. A parallel enquiry to the Permanent Secretary of the Department, Bernadette Kelly, was not favoured with the courtesy of a reply.

The society's committee continues to take the view that help should have been sought from the Department for Transport and that this might have enabled a solution to the objections raised by the landowners to have been found.

We also continue to take the view that the consultation exercise of last March was so badly flawed by the failure of its contractors to deliver circulars as instructed that the county council should not have based a decision to proceed on the statistics derived from it. It is true that a

majority of respondents to the consultation were in favour of the scheme, but so many of the residents most directly affected were not told about it as to make the results of the exercise invalid.

We find it very depressing that the county council continues to state to the Press that 4,000 leaflets were delivered to individual homes, several weeks after we have presented the county council with clear evidence to the contrary that this was not the case. Reasoned debate is one thing, but for intelligent, educated people to continue to deny what can be shown to be the truth simply makes them and their employer look stupid.

We still intend to make a complaint on this matter to the Local Government Ombudsman, even though at present our attempt to do so is being obstructed by the county council.

It remains open to anyone affected by the scheme to apply to the High Court for leave to bring a judicial review against the county council's actions, but this would be an extremely expensive and risky undertaking. We are quite sure that the county council have factored this into their decision to go ahead in the face of fierce opposition.



HS2 CANCELLED WITH SAD LOSS OF MAINTENANCE DEPOT

THE Civic Society committee agreed at its last meeting not to adopt a position for or against the cancellation of most of the route of the eastern arm of HS2, including the section through Chesterfield, since opinion on the committee, as elsewhere, was divided.

One aspect of the decision on which there is likely to be general agreement is that the loss of the promised infrastructure maintenance depot at Staveley is unfortunate. This promised some 250 jobs, mostly in skilled engineering trades in which the district has a strong tradition. These will not now be created, unless another occupier in a similar line of business can be found for the site.

In the short-term this appears to be unlikely, since we understand that the route, including the land at Staveley earmarked for the works, has been 'safeguarded', meaning that it cannot be used for any other purpose. This protection could usefully be removed from the site of the maintenance depot.



STATION MASTER PLAN STILL NEEDS TO GO AHEAD

IN recent months the Borough Council has tended to refer to its plans for the remodelling of the station approach as the 'HS2 Masterplan'. This we felt was a mistake, in case (as has happened) HS2 was abandoned in its original form. We have always been told, however, that the plans have been funded independently of HS2, which is fortunate, and so there should be no reason for the scheme not to go ahead. No-one could sensibly suggest that the area around the station can remain as it is.

Speaking at a recent Destination Chesterfield event, the Borough Council's chief executive, Huw Bowen, explained that the delay in demolishing the former Chesterfield Hotel had arisen because of the difficulty of finding a new home for the radio aerials on the roof. That problem has now been overcome and so the building should come down early in 2022. This is welcome news.

An important part of the plan is the building of a new road between the station and Hollis Lane, using part of the old station goods yard and the land currently occupied by Jewsons, the builders' merchants.

Once this road is open, there would be a strong case for closing to motor traffic the lower section of Crow Lane between the station and its junction with Piccadilly Road, which includes the bridge taking the railway over Crow Lane. This has very substandard clearance over the road and can only be worked safely with traffic lights.

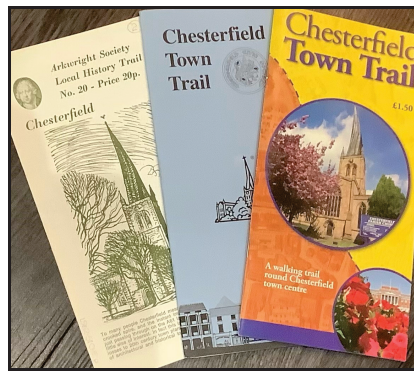
The closure of Crow Lane would relieve Piccadilly Road of most through traffic, for which it is not suited because of the large amount of on-street parking on both sides. Much of this is unavoidable, since many of the houses on the road lack off-street parking, but it makes the road difficult for vehicles to negotiate at busy times.

A new, more direct route between the station and Hollis Lane, with no residential property on it, would make it possible to remove the present rat-run via Crow Lane and Piccadilly Road. The case for closing the upper section of Crow Lane, beyond the entrance to the golf course, would then become stronger, since that would completely eliminate through traffic from Piccadilly Road.

A 'VISITOR STRATEGY' FOR CHESTERFIELD, 2021–26

THE Borough Council has recently published on its website a 'Visitor Strategy' prepared by consultants, suggesting ways in which the number of visitors to the town can be increased over the next five years. This is being made available in draft for comment.

The Civic Society committee has decided not to make any response to the document, mainly because of a serious difference of opinion within the committee as to its merits. Other Civic Society members are of course welcome to read the report and make their own comments to the council.



BUT A NEW TOWN TRAIL IS NEEDED NOW

ONE aspect of the question of attracting more visitors to Chesterfield over which there is no dispute is the need for more and better interpretative material, or in other words a new town trail. This we see as an immediate and short-term need, without prejudice to the possibility mentioned in the last newsletter of producing a digital trail around the town using QR codes.

As far as we can establish, the last trail produced by the Borough Council appeared in 2008 and has been out of print for some time. This was quite an elaborate 12-page A5 booklet printed (fairly expensively) in full colour. The text was reasonably accurate but needs revising rather than merely reprinting.

Some years ago the Civic Society produced a more detailed, but more modestly produced, 20-page booklet describing a walk round the town beginning and ending at the Peacock on Low Pavement, then the home of the town's tourist information centre.

Last reprinted in 1991, this would also need revision and a rejigging of the itinerary so that it started from the present visitor centre in Rykneld Square. It would benefit from a more elaborate map and colour illustrations but otherwise remains sound.

We have asked the Borough Council what their own plans are before making a decision about updating our trail. But we do feel strongly that something is needed in time for the start of the 2022 tourist season (i.e. by Easter). At the moment the visitor centre has nothing to offer someone wanting a short guide to the

town, describing buildings worth seeing during a visit of a couple of hours or half a day.

The more visitors can be persuaded to walk round the town and not merely visit the church and perhaps the museum, the more time they will spend in Chesterfield and the more they are likely to spend money on goods and services locally. Virtually all towns (and many villages) have a trail and it is slightly embarrassing for a place the size of Chesterfield, with a number of buildings in the town centre worth seeing, to be without one.

It is also unfortunate that at present the parish church has no published guide available for visitors.

PLANNING: ELM TREE INN, STAVELEY



WE have recently been consulted by the Borough Council about a (resubmitted) application to convert a disused pub in Staveley High Street to residential use and build new houses and flats in the large yard alongside and behind.

We have supported the application, since it will bring a derelict building back into beneficial use, but we have urged the council to ask the applicant's architect to redesign the front elevations of the new houses.

The architect has used mock timber-framing, which does not have a strong tradition in Staveley, and the type of framing chosen is more suited to the Midlands and South than north Derbyshire or south Yorkshire. It does not match, as the architect claims, the 1930s mock framing on the adjoining house, which is closer to the correct pattern.

NEW HOUSING AT DUNSTON

A residents' action group formed to oppose further new house-building on Dunston Road near its northern end has asked the Civic Society for support.

Our view is that since the land is zoned in the Local Plan for housing, it is difficult for the council to reject the application without running the risk of later losing an appeal by the developers. One argument that can be advanced is that this area is treated in the Local Plan as 'reserve' housing land, and that it is premature to seek to build on it so early in the plan period. On the other hand, this is only putting off the evil hour.

Objections based on the proximity of Dunston Hall seem to us to carry little weight. The setting of the Hall has already been much altered by the development of the garden centre from former farm buildings and Mr Harrison's recent creation of a wedding venue at the Hall itself has further adversely affected any 'historic setting' that once existed.

The county council has raised quite serious objections to the design of the scheme. This includes both the positioning of a 'local centre' close to its north-western edge, arguing that this has been done more with a view to passing trade than serving residents of the new estate, and the way in which houses will extend to the skyline in the north west.

Although the further suggestion that the adjoining rural land north of Dunston Road is one of the most sensitive landscapes in Derbyshire seems an overstatement, a large estate on the southern side of the road will certainly not improve the appearance of the area. As the county council suggests, the fundamental mistake was to zone this land for housing in the first place in the Local Plan.

Whatever claims the developers make, it seems very unlikely that this latest addition to the built-up area of Dunston, where almost all the housing dates from after 1945, will be any better designed than earlier

owner-occupied estates. There appears to be no mechanism by which local planning authorities can insist that builders do not simply use standard house designs and unimaginative layouts for all new developments.

The Civic Society has written a letter supporting the residents' group and drawing attention to the county council's objections. An enormous number of objections from local residents (and other documents) can be found on the Borough Council's planning website under the reference CHE/21/00549/OUT.

REFURBISHING THE STEPHENSON MEMORIAL HALL



At our November committee meeting we briefly discussed the major planning application submitted by the Borough Council (to itself) to refurbish and alter the Stephenson Memorial Hall, on which we have been asked to comment. We are at present working up a response to what is proposed, which includes both the modernisation of the Pomegranate Theatre and a complete transformation of the layout and displays at the museum. As soon as we submit our comments to the council, we will post them on the society's website and summarise

them in the next newsletter.

Any members who would like to make their own comments to the council can find details of the application on the planning website. (CHE/21/802/LBC).

BLUE PLAQUE NEWS

We have finally been able to hand over to the University of Derby the plaque recording the history of what is now their Chesterfield campus. This will be erected on one of the gateposts at the front entrance in the New Year. We hope to have an unveiling ceremony to which former pupils of St Helena School will be invited.

The plaque for the Winding Wheel should shortly receive listed building consent and we hope also to install it early next year.

Following the announcement of the remodelling of the Stephenson Memorial Hall, it will probably not be possible to install the plaque at the Pomegranate Theatre until after the building work has been completed. Among the changes proposed is to bring back into use the original main entrance (which many Civic Society members will remember as the entrance to the old central library). If possible we would like our plaque to be positioned at this new entrance, where most people will see it.

NOW ON FACEBOOK

The Civic Society now has a Facebook page. This latest development enables us to 'post' news quickly or to signpost to more detailed information on our website. Anyone can view our Facebook posts but to comment on them you need to have a Facebook account. See <https://www.facebook.com/pg/Chesterfield-District-Civic-Society-103866642097524/posts>. Our website continues to be regularly updated: see <http://www.chesterfieldcivicsociety.org.uk/>.