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# CHESTERFIELD & DISTRICT CIVIC SOCIETY

# NEWSLETTER

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## Campaigning to make Chesterfield a better place to live

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### VERY SORRY, BUT IT LOOKS LIKE THE END OF THE ROAD

**D**ESPITE the best efforts of a number of Civic Society members and local residents, it is now clear that the county council cannot be prevented from going ahead with their disastrous decision to wreck the appearance of the Brookside section of Chatsworth Road by building a cycle track virtually no-one living on or near the road wants.

At the same time, the road will be made more dangerous for pedestrians, and is likely to become the scene of possibly serious accidents involving the large number of heavy goods vehicles using what is already a relatively narrow main road.

Chatsworth Road will join many similar schemes in other parts of the

country as a sad memorial to the way in which public policy towards road transport has been unduly influenced by the success of a small pressure group (recreational cyclists) without any regard for local residents or the vast majority of road users.

This story illustrates problems at several levels. First, it is a waste of the public's money. The county council freely admits that it is only going ahead with because it has been given money for the purpose by the Government, as if this was somehow 'free' money that has appeared from nowhere. It of course simply money from a different jam-jar and has still come out of taxpayers' pockets, even if it has not come from council tax raised locally.

Second, it illustrates the Government's lack of interest in curtailing waste in public expenditure, much less achieving any real reduction, which might make possible a reduction in the current cripplingly high

levels of taxation. The Transport Department has consistently refused to become involved in decisions on schemes like the one in Chesterfield, merely saying that it is making money available for local authorities to spend as they think best, and it is for them to take account (or not, as in this case) of the wishes of local residents who will be adversely affected.

Third, it is clear that the recent change in Transport Secretary will not lead to any change of policy, even though the new minister is a chartered accountant, rather than an innumerate clown (who, unbelievably, has now been put in charge of Britain's nuclear energy policy).

Presumably the whole Active Travel Programme is seen by Harper as a 'rounding error' compared with his department's larger budgets (such as the open drain formerly known as Network Rail down which he is currently pouring billions of pounds of other people's money). There is no sign of the programme being scrapped or even being mentioned by ministers.

Fourth, it shows that Derbyshire county council is, as its many critics have claimed, an undemocratic, unaccountable and inefficient body which manages both to spend large amounts of taxpayers' money and to ignore the wishes of its voters. It is difficult to think of any service for which the county council is responsible that is currently being run well. Anyone with first-hand recent experience of Derbyshire's roads, schools, care homes and libraries is unlikely to find much to praise.

In the specific case of the Chats-

worth Road debacle, the undemocratic nature of the county council stands out very clearly. In the days when local authorities operated through a committee system, the county highways committee would have included at least one member from Chesterfield, as the largest town in the administrative county, who could have told the committee that a scheme like the cycle track was unwanted by the vast majority of local residents.

Now, the county council is run by a small cabal (the 'cabinet') of members who can effectively do what they like with no committee to consult. One of the most striking features of the present controversy is the contempt with which the cabinet member for transport has treated those opposed to the cycle track (from Toby Perkins downwards) and simply told his officers to tell anyone who wrote to him to say that their comments would be ignored.

Athwal sits for a division almost as far away from Chesterfield as it is possible to get; he evidently knows and cares nothing about local opinion (or quite possibly about roads) but is simply determined to spend money on a project his officers have told him meets Government criteria.

It appears not to have occurred to him, his cabinet colleagues or his officers that another option would have been to tell the Government that the county council does not wish to waste the public's money on something most of the public doesn't want, and put the cheque back in the post. But no, if it's there you've got to spend it. And then people wonder why public expenditure in Britain is out of control.

Finally there is the question of the on-line consultations. The first, as the Local Government Ombudsman found, was deeply flawed and the 'results' meaningless. The second appears to be much the same.

According to figures published by the county council, 741 people voted in favour of the Chatsworth Road scheme and 430 objected. The second total is probably made up almost entirely of local people and is comparable to the 350 who attended the Civic Society's meeting at Brookfield School in November 2021. It is difficult to imagine many

people from outside Chesterfield taking the trouble to vote against something that did not affect them, or even looking at the website on which they could vote.

Figures obtained by the Civic Society under the Freedom of Information Act show that of the 741 votes in favour of the Chatsworth Road scheme 335 came from respondents who gave S40 or S41 postcodes, which cover most of Chesterfield. This means that 406 (about 55 per cent) did not.

We have not been able to obtain a breakdown of where these 406 votes did come from, but the county council has supplied an analysis by post-code of the 1240 votes submitted for all three questions asked in the consultation (the Chatsworth Road cycle track, the extension of the 30 mph speed limit, and the closure of Crow Lane). About a thousand of these gave Chesterfield postcodes and most of the rest were from elsewhere in Derbyshire or Sheffield.

At first sight, this suggests that the vast majority of votes were from local people but without a breakdown between the three questions it is impossible to say whether this applied to the Chatsworth Road cycle track. The suspicion must remain that the cycling lobby secured votes from outside the town to achieve a majority in favour.

In the end, of course, none of this matters, since the county council were clearly determined to go ahead with the scheme, as soon as the consultation had been completed. The fact that the exercise produced a majority in favour of the Chatsworth Road cycle track was simply a welcome bonus.

All that can be said now is that any road reconstruction scheme can be reversed in the future, although only at further expense to public funds. It is to be hoped that such a decision is made before, rather than after, there have been serious accidents on this section of Chatsworth Road as a result of the county council's disastrous decision.

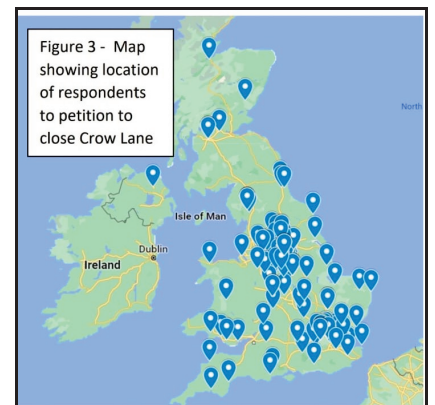


## AND FOR CROW LANE

**T**HROUGHOUT this long controversy opinion has always been more evenly divided concerning the proposal to close Crow Lane to motor vehicles between the entrance to Tapton golf course and just short of Dobbin Clough and the adjoining property near the top of the steepest section of the road.

No-one would dispute that this part of Crow Lane is very narrow as well as steep, with high-sided banks that limit visibility and make it difficult for vehicles to pass. Only a handful of frontagers would be inconvenienced by its closure to vehicles (compared with several hundred on Chatsworth Road) and the road would become much pleasanter as a walking route if there was no other traffic.

The upper section of Crow Lane does not form part of a through route, and tends to be used as a short-cut for those driving to and from the Royal Hospital or Calow who wish to avoid the A632, or to and from Brimington Common without using the A619. Both main roads are very congested for much of the day.



In this case the county council received a petition containing 744 names opposed to the closure and another with 522 supporting it. No

analysis by postcode of the distribution of signatories in either case has been obtained, but the Civic Society has been sent a map showing the location of respondents. This seems to show that interest in closing Crow Lane extends over an improbably wide area. The obvious suspicion is that the cycling lobby had organised voting from outside the area in favour of closure.

In the online consultation 752 voted in favour of closure and 416 against, virtually the opposite of the two petitions. In their spin on these figures the county council claimed that this meant that in all 1160 people were opposed to the closure and 1274 were in favour. These totals are clearly meaningless, since they may include a good deal of duplication.

Once again, however, it was clear from the outset that the county council had no intention of taking any notice of local opinion. This was demonstrated a year ago when it failed to reopen Crow Lane after the temporary closure ludicrously introduced as a 'social distancing' measure during the pandemic. The road was only reopened after the Civic Society pointed out that the continuing closure was unlawful, and was accompanied by a comment by an officer that, although the county council had no option but to comply with the law, it would nonetheless close the road as soon as soon as possible.

It remains to be seen what the effect of closure is. One possibility is that traffic currently using Crow Lane as a short-cut will transfer onto Dark Lane, Wheathill Lane and Pettyclose Lane, and then use either Balmoak Lane or Paxton Road to reach Brimington Road. This route is also narrow in places, although less steeply graded. Residents of Balmoak Lane and Paxton Road are unlikely to be happy about an increase in through traffic going past their houses, but unless the route is severed as a through road it is difficult to see how this loss of amenity can be avoided.

There remains the question of how the closed section of Crow Lane can be made safe for pedestrians. Cyclists going down Crow Lane are likely to be travelling, almost silently, at a relatively high speed. If they collide with a pedestrian serious injury could result. Ideally, two reserved lanes

should be created on Crow Lane, with a barrier between them, one for pedestrians and the other for cyclists. There is no evidence that the county council intends to do this. As in the case of Chatsworth Road, it would be better to take this precaution before, rather than after, a pedestrian is killed or seriously injured.



One of the low headroom bridges carrying the Midland main line over Crow Lane.

Now that the future of the upper section of Crow Lane has been settled, and the new link road from Hollis Lane to the station is to go ahead, it is worth considering whether the lower section of Crow Lane, between Piccadilly Road and Malkin Street, should also be closed to vehicles once the new road has been opened.

This part of Crow Lane is narrow and passes under the railway through two bridges with substandard headroom. This section has one-way working controlled by traffic lights. It is hazardous for pedestrians, because of the habitual practice of cyclists to ignore red lights, turn off the carriageway and use the pavement to go under the bridge, riding in the opposite direction to vehicular traffic. No cyclist appears ever to have been prosecuted for this offence.

If the lower part of Crow Lane was closed, Piccadilly Road, which suffers from excessive on-street parking, would no longer be used as a short-cut to the station and the risk of bridge strikes would be removed. Access to Tapton Terrace could be maintained from Brimington Road. If this section of Crow Lane was also divided into two, pedestrians would be able to walk safely to and from the station and cyclists could ride under the bridges to their hearts' content without breaking the law.

## MAYORAL COMBINED AUTHORITY: MORE DEPRESSING NEWS

FOR ANYONE interested in either local democracy or the efficient use of public money, a further reason to be gloomy is the realisation that there appears to be no way of preventing the Government wasting more taxpayers' money on setting up the proposed mayoral combined authority for Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire.

This has now progressed to the customary sham 'public consultation' stage in which respondents are being asked to vote for or against getting 'an extra £38m. of public expenditure guaranteed for the next 30 years'. It is depressing to realise that many people (or at least many of the small number of people who take any interest in these things) will actually believe this nonsense.

No government can bind its successors for the next three years, never mind 30, and there is still no word about how much this new quango will cost to run, or what the £38m. a year will be spent on. Under the scheme the four principal local authorities in the two counties will cede their responsibility for transport, regeneration and possibly other functions to the new body.

What we can be certain about is that the creation of the new authority will lead to an increase in public expenditure for no discernible gain (and almost certainly no improvement in public transport) and a further loss of even a semblance of democratic control over how public money is spent in Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire.

In the longer term, there is the risk that Derbyshire's present system of two-tier local government, which at least in Chesterfield has worked reasonably well for over a century, will disappear and the town will be run by a much enlarged single-tier authority that bears a striking and deeply unattractive resemblance to the present Derbyshire county council.

## BLUE PLAQUE FOR WINDING WHEEL AT LAST

**A**FTER a rather lengthy period since the plaque was actually made, we are finally within sight of it being installed. The Borough Council have suggested an unveiling ceremony by the Mayor in January, at the beginning of the year which marks the centenary of the opening of the Picture House on Holywell Street. All Civic Society members are warmly invited to attend and the council have kindly agreed to lay on refreshments. We will let members know the date as soon as we have it.

## STILL NO NEWS ABOUT TAPTON HOUSE ...

**T**HERE have been no further developments in the long-running saga over the future of Tapton House since the last Newsletter appeared. What has mainly happened is that Friends of Tapton House, whose leading figures seem regrettably reluctant to sign their public statements with anyone's name, have continued to advocate a 'community use' for the building, without explaining where the funding for this would come from.

Continued repetition of their proposals in rather similar letters which seem to appear every week to the *Derbyshire Times* does not make them any more feasible.

Their ideas remain laudable in principle but appear to be impossible of achievement in practice. Nor is it clear whether the building is suitable for some of the uses they suggest, or whether Historic England would agree to the local authority granting listed building consent for any structural changes to the interior that might be needed.

In the meantime, like any empty

building, Tapton House is not looking any less shabby as time goes by, nor is it becoming any less vulnerable to vandalism.

We hope that the council will make a decision about the disposal of the building as soon as possible, to a lessee who is in a position to proceed without delay on the major capital expenditure that will clearly be needed before the property can be used for any new purpose.

## ... OR ABOUT HURST HOUSE

**W**E ARE STILL no nearer a solution to the two related problems of bringing Hurst House back into beneficial use and placing the administration of the Chesterfield Schools Foundation, the charity that owns the property, on a footing that complies with the law.

Derbyshire county council, as sole trustee of the charity, has continued to achieve the not-very-difficult task of fending off enquiries from that most useless of regulators, the Charity Commission, with bland assurances that it is dealing with the matter. There is not the slightest evidence that it is. Meanwhile, the Charity Commission has displayed its usual supineness in not taking any action.

The next step is to make a complaint about the performance of the Charity Commission (since complaints to the Charity Commission about the performance of the county council have achieved nothing). The disincentive to taking this further action is that complaints about the Charity Commission are investigated by none other than — the Charity Commission.

Despite this problem, we do intend to make a complaint, and if possible find some way of bringing this long-running scandal (we first complained to the Charity Commission about the inappropriate and possibly unlawful use of the charity's funds by the county council in 2017) to the attention of the ministerial department

which takes parliamentary responsibility for the Commission's performance. That, unfortunately, appears to be very difficult to achieve, since the Commission has always jealously guarded its anachronistic 'non-departmental' status, claiming that it places the Commission beyond parliamentary scrutiny.

## FUTURE OF TOWN CENTRE FOCUS FOR FUTURE MEETING

**L**IKE OTHERS, we remain concerned about the future of the town centre in this post Covid, internet and out-of-town shopping era. Chesterfield is not unique in the challenges it faces in this respect and there has been and continues to be investment in the town.

We have previously highlighted some of these challenges, including the continued loss of retail, most recently apparent in the closure of the High Street/Market Place branch of Marks & Spencer at the end of November.

To start gathering ideas about this issue, we plan to hold a member and public meeting in the New Year, with perhaps a couple of keynote speakers. We will keep you informed about this event, which is likely to be held at a town centre venue on a weekday evening.

## BACK IN JANUARY

**B**ECAUSE it has in recent years become such a short month, we will not issue a Civic Society Newsletter specifically for December (unless something momentous happens before the two-week close-down begins), but we will be back in January, when hopefully there will be some more cheerful news to report.

We wish all our members a Happy Christmas and thank them for their support over the last year.