

The “Rutland Conversation” Empingham Parish Council (EPC) Comments

Background

Rutland County Council launched a series of surveys, webinars and forums under the heading of the “Rutland Conversation” to obtain information from residents to establish a community shared vision of the characteristics of Rutland that should be conserved and guide policy for the next 50 years.

EPC welcomed the consultation and encouraged residents to take part.

The information gathering is aimed at individuals rather than Parish Councils. However since some residents do not find technology easy to use and may be discouraged by the form and length of the questionnaire EPC will contribute.

Before commenting on the individual themes of the conversation, the timing of the exercise warrants comment. RCC recently submitted a Local Plan which if endorsed at national level will change the County forever. A new town half as big again as Uppingham proposed at Edith Weston would dwarf whatever emerges from the conversation. The two previous public consultations, that overwhelmingly rejected the new town, were ignored. This would probably lead to a great deal of cynicism regarding this latest consultation. To make it meaningful the Local Plan should be paused or withdrawn until the results of the conversation are known.

COUNCIL SERVICES

EPC is not a recipient of most services but is not aware of major criticisms of 23 services listed. EPC has a role in planning and highways and transport. The development control aspect of planning seems to work reasonably well but the public record should be improved and building control, not directly undertaken by RCC, is open to abuse and without reasonable quality assurance of the system. Minor highways issues reported by EPC used to be dealt with efficiently and in a timely manner but there has been a marked decline in performance in recent months.

EPC has major problems with lack of resource RCC can bring to major planning and highways issues. EPC responded in detail to the Local Plan consultation, backed up by external expert advice. Problems and issues highlighted were simply

dismissed in a perfunctory manner. No attempt was made to fashion a reasoned response.

EPC and residents were appalled at the lack of prior consultation about the decision to replace the relatively quiet road surface on the A606 through Empingham with a much noisier top dressing. EPC and the Ward Councillors were not asked for opinion or notified in advance. The new and noisy surface coincided with months of overnight closures of the A1 which made life intolerable for residents living on, or close to the A606. Post implementation EPC representations resulted in minor work to remedy errors by the contractor. EPC, and residents, remain convinced that **RCC could not care less about the adverse effects on residents** and that procedures will not be improved. Information about the extent and numbers of closures of the A1 and night diversions sought by EPC some time ago is still awaited.

This simply reinforces our strongly held view that RCC lacks resources and expertise to deal with matters out of the ordinary, needs to improve communications with, and feedback to users, and cannot hope to police and protect the County from the impacts of major new developments like a new town.

LIVING IN RUTLAND

EPC endorses the sentiment in early results of the surveys and webinars to date that record a marked emphasis on the value placed by residents on the rural nature of Rutland and the pleasant ambience of its market towns.

The questions on housing are trite without context. Asking people whether they want more affordable housing without defining what affordable housing is in a local context is meaningless. Similarly where should low cost housing be located is a vital question.

Do we want to play our part in meeting a claimed national housing shortage by complying with the Government's housing target for Rutland, or do we want to do more than play our part by providing more than 40% more housing in Rutland than the Government target ? The submitted Local Plan makes provision for housing which exceeds the Government target for Rutland by more than 40%. There is no correlation between local supply and price as the Plan asserts. The

national professional planning institute simply and effectively destroyed that claim in their recent response to a Government green paper.

There is a total lack of discussion on social housing (the old fashioned council housing) at rent levels levels local low income families can afford.

The questions are not the most relevant to ask and thus will lead to inadequate policy formulation.

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Empingham has good local health facilities providing GP services for residents from Whissendine to Stamford. Patient satisfaction with services is high. Not surprisingly patient numbers have increased significantly to over 8,200 at present. Further increased are expected. The Medical Centre has planned expansion for three additional consulting rooms with recruitment already in hand for more clinical staff. The Centre is committed to maintaining the high standard of service.

As a rural county Rutland is fortunate to have access to hospital services in Leicestershire, Stamford, Peterborough and Cambridgeshire. The current reorganization of hospital services in Leicester with a number of services being concentrated at Glenfield will leave many of our residents with increased journey times. The voluntary car schemes for patients are praiseworthy but may need improved local coordination and publicity.

LEISURE AND RECREATION

One of Rutland's functions is to provide leisure facilities for urban dwellers to enjoy rural delights. Empingham's proximity to Rutland Water benefits the village but is not without some problems. The Parish also has reasonably well maintained and signposted pedestrian rights of way.

EPC has not been concerned with issues related to RCC's leisure and recreational facilities for residents.

ENVIROMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE AND BIODIVERSITY

Rutland has recently “declared a climate crisis”. There is also an accelerating biodiversity loss in the county. EPC does not believe that RCC can have more than a minimal impact on both these issues. EPC will respond positively to any policy proposals put forward, but we also are bound to say that the effects of a car dependent new town in an isolated rural situation will swamp whatever new initiatives RCC might introduce to improve the situation. Using the rump of the St Georges Barracks site to increase and restore biodiversity in the county would be a much better policy than an overprovision of housing.

LEARNING SKILLS AND EMPLOYMENT

Local Primary School provision is good. Secondary and Further education opportunities are also reasonable.

There is an unwarranted emphasis on population balance or lack of it. Rutland is not a retirement ghetto, but the age profile is definitely skewed to the higher age groups. But ,Rutland is far to small a place to pursue a policy of a balanced population. Corby , Melton, Peterborough and Leicester are all lively employment centres within easy reach. The specialists employed by the County Council to look at employment sites in the county did not identify a deficit, rather the reverse.

There are advocates that redundant military facilities should be utilized as science parks or country parks. Rutland should seek to attract higher quality employment opportunities.

CONCLUSION

EPC welcomes the initiative and its intent but is sceptical about the questions posed, the response levels being likely to be achieved, and very sceptical about the timing.

A Local Plan, in limbo, if resurrected, will have far more impact than anything that is likely to emerge from this exercise.

Minimum level of responses needed related to the adult population should be set for this exercise to have any real meaning in relation to future policies.

