

Questions and Answers – Maria Bailey NDC – (Appendix A – March 2022 meeting)

Planning decisions involving section 106 agreements

1. Following on from West Down Parish Council's recent complaint, what changes have been made to your department and your stated aim to "reduce the opportunity for errors, speed up decision-making, ensure accountability for monitoring and invoicing and increase transparency"?
2. How have you publicised the changes to regain the local councils' confidence and promote your new ethos?

Answer:

Maria Bailey referred to government funding being received to improve S106 processes. There is a module on the Master Government system which was not used before. This will be in one place now, with one person in complete control unlike before. Reports have to be given monthly, with a final report at the end of April. The issues of concern came out in the audit report so they are having to report back to senior management on how they are progressing. Cllr Reeves referred to monitoring and invoicing and the lack of communication between the District and County Councils. Ms Bailey acknowledged this had been an issue and stated that part of the resources for enforcement will be active monitoring. Jotters have been introduced for when officers are out and about so they can look on the system and all the information will be there. The Lead Officer for our area (Matthew Brown) now has S106 responsibility in his Job Description. Cllr Ayre was extremely concerned that a huge amount of money due to the village had been missed out on due to technology not being used.

With regards to publishing the changes, Ms Bailey acknowledged that the Council need to do more. This is why she is going round to local councils and they will do more such as putting information on their website. There has been restructuring in the organisation, with any spare capacity being moved across.

Planning application general process

1. How is the process for dealing with planning applications being improved (one of NDC's stated 10-point action plan to tackle the local housing crisis)?
2. In particular, with regarding to time scales on planning applications, what are you doing with regard to accommodating Parish Councils that only meet once a month or less?
3. Why does the Parish Council not get amended plans?
4. How do Parish Councillors access consultation responses.

Answer:

Ms Bailey felt there had been improvements. It had been difficult, with not enough people coming into the planning profession and a need to make the role more exciting so that career progression can be seen. The government are meant to be putting something together to look at solutions. Timescales had been particularly bad when they got behind on validation. They are now on top of this, so things are being validated in two days. If there is no Parish Council Meeting in the time scale then Parish Councils still need to ask for extensions but eventually this will be on the computer. With regards to amended plans, Parish Councils should be consulted. Lower Broad

Park slipped through the net. If there are only small amendments they do not always give the full 21 days but an extension can be requested. Ms Bailey was to go back and action this.

The consultation process should be auto linked on the computer once personal information has been removed. A box has to be ticked to make information public. There have been issues on this when officers were under pressure. Brand new software came in just before the pandemic then nothing happened. Ms Bailey was pleased that the new Head of Service gave her a dedicated person.

Housing crisis

1. "Our team is working hard to tackle the housing crisis in the District, they were recently ranked second highest performing authority in the South West in government performance tables" (Facebook 01.02.22)

Tell us more? NDC certainly did not assist the community of West Down with its housing crisis, in fact it hindered it. Did the performance tables take account of issues like that, or is everyone else doing really badly?

Answer:

Ms Bailey stated that the performance tables had been based on speed but was not necessarily a Quality indicator. NDC were still getting things out a lot quicker compared to other authorities. Officers have been working 12 to 15 hours a day and are exhausted. They also have to take leave and there was the sad passing of one of their officers.

Further questions relating to NDC's 10-point housing crisis action plan.

2. How are NDC going to reduce the 'loss' of affordable housing from viability challenges?
3. How are NDC using and assisting Community Land Trusts to increase the supply of affordable houses?

Answer:

Ms Bailey referred to key worker accommodation. They have a ten-point action plan, with everyone having needs. Viability has been really difficult. Sites are allocated on the basis of open market housing but also affordable housing, education provision and infrastructure. The Local Plan adopted in 2018 is not working so they have already started the Local Plan Review. They have got to look at getting the viability better, which will probably cost the authority money as it has got to pay for expertise and need to provide better scrutiny.

Viability work was carried out in 2015 but the world has changed a lot since then. The cost of everything has gone through the roof. They want to make sure viability is right at the top of their agenda. Whoever does viability needs to do the plan. Viability was one of the reasons West Down lost a once in a lifetime opportunity. The difficulty is that whenever there is national guidance, it covers the whole of the country, with elements not fit for purpose. The issue is how much the developer pays for the land.

One of the ten points is supporting Community Land Trusts a lot more. Ken Miles has now brought in people who are enthusiastic. There is a need to react when things go wrong and put things right. Cllr Drew queried whether apprentices are trained in house. Ms Bailey stated that they have to get a qualification at Bristol and Plymouth Universities. During the pandemic a lot was done on line. Now they have to go during term times. There is a mixture of out on site and courses to get the recognised qualifications. Two girls were employed recently, who were appointed as they challenged issues at interview which Mr Miles wants.