

## CHAIRMAN'S REPORT TO THE 2012 AGM

For HIMN, its second year of existence has been largely a further period of watching and waiting, mainly because of what the government did or did not do, which had implications for Canterbury City Council and others. So we have been watching developments in three areas because :

- i) the election wrote finis to LDF but nothing much else happened because everyone had to wait on the coalition government turning its slogans into realities. This took until November for the Localism Bill while the National Planning Policy Framework is still under discussion. Both these will have considerable implications for our community.
- ii) While this was going on CCC took no action on a local level about housing plans although it did embark on two related initiatives, relevant to us.
- iii) Other bodies, with which HIMN has been working, notably the Canterbury Society have also been waiting on others and are only just producing new suggestions.

**i) Government Policy:** Immediately after the election, the new Secretary of State for Communities Eric Pickles announced the abolition of the Regional Development Agencies (creating Local Development Partnerships in their place); cancelled the Local Development Frameworks and the existing housing targets which underlay the idea of putting 3,500 houses in South Canterbury; cut funding to local government and hinted at other measures.

Much of this was then enshrined in the *Localism Act* which became law on 15 November and will mostly become operative on 1 April 2012. It is a long and obscure document of 241 articles, many of which amend articles in other acts. There are also 25 long Schedules spelling out the detail of some of the changes. As a result the philosophy and impact of the Act are very hard to discern.

The main points seem to be that the Act gives local authorities a general power of competence, so they can now do what they want, unless legislation provides otherwise, rather than needing specific legal justifications to take action. It also gives them more control over business rates and opens the way to elected Mayors in bigger cities and allows for change in the way other cities govern themselves. This could make District Councils more important and active but the Secretary of State also gets new powers.

For us what matters are the new rights given to communities: to challenge for provision of services; to bid for assets; to veto excessive rises in taxation; to decide on rubbish collections, to know about officers' pay and, especially to produce Neighbourhood Plans and Development Orders. These will have to emerge, in our case, from the Parish Council and Thanington is not indicating that it intends to draw up a Plan. However, national housing targets and RDAs have been abolished. The Community Infrastructure Levy has also been reformed. These things will be important when it comes to any new CCC proposals and when HIMN tries to devise a positive way forward rather than just opposing, as it has always tried to do.

However, much of this (like talk of the Big Society) was obscured by furore over the *National Planning Policy Framework*. This aimed to simplify 1300 pages of legislation down to 52 pages. It runs to 191 Paragraphs and seeks to make the basic assumption of planning to be Yes to sustainable development.

There was Immediate opposition from the National Trust and other public bodies when it was put out for consultation in late July with the *Telegraph* launching a 'Hands Off our Land' campaign. The government was forced to consult the opposition and rethink but there was a further critical Commons Report in December. The main complaints were that the draft was a developers' charter which gave greenfield

development priority over brownfield. CCC shared some of these doubts but was still attracted by the building bonus. It was also aware that it would have to speed up its work on a Local Plan if it was to retain control of applications. The final version of the draft has yet to appear but will be crucial both to CCC and ourselves. So we must keep watching

**ii) Canterbury City Council.** Having published public responses to the LDF, the Council welcomed the drift of the Secretary of State's proposals and left its own plans on the back burner ahead of the Local Government elections. Before these HIMN did write to all the party leaders and got replies from most which were then posted and displayed in a letter to the Gazette so that voters knew what the planning context was.

However, the Council did undertake two initiatives relevant to us. One was when it linked up with other authorities to make a bid for development funds under the *Local Investment Partnership*. The final submission seemed to suggest that the Council was shifting its interest in development to the Barton Farm site. Nothing seemed to happen as a result of this.

Then, in July the Council had an open meeting at Christchurch University to launch a consultation on its Corporate Strategy to which I was invited. It was a very constrained consultation, inviting people to prioritize three things from a list including economic development, disadvantage, involvement, safety, congestion, children, homes, culture and sports. Those favoured by the consultation would be used to guide future Council spending. Failure to obtain a quorum at our August committee meeting meant that HIMN was not able to put in its own formal response. The proposals were largely endorsed by the Consultation though the ordering of priorities was changed but queries meant that it was not all put to bed before the end of the year.

Not much was said about housing in the documents and the terms used were very vague. But the document's commitment to the 4th access onto the A2 at Wincheap does have implications for us. It would suggest that CCC is not just thinking of a Bridge access, as we suspected, but still sees South Canterbury as a possible area for development.

**iii)** During this period of waiting HIMN tried not to lose sight of the possibilities of development nearby, especially as it was aware developers are still surveying. So we continued to work with **other interested groups** like the Canterbury Society through which we attended the KFAS meeting on 'Localism' in Margate. This explored ways of using the new legislation, of which speakers were critical. The messages which emerged were that changes in attitude were more important than the actual legal text and that resources would be needed to draw up Neighbourhood Plans and utilize the new powers given by the legislation. We also attended the launch meeting of 'Vision for Canterbury'.

**Other Matters** - HIMN Committee put in some suggestions to the revived Consultation on the possible closure of Hollow Lane, though not acted on, partly because decision taken by Joint Committee was not to close the road but to introduce 7.5 ton limits (save for access, which means our community is still at risk.)

Hence it now looks as if 2012 might see more action so we still need to be wary and prepared. I hope that this report will help members to appreciate where we stand.

CHC 10 January 2012