

Woodruff
Thornbury
Holsworthy
EX22 7DD

21st July 2017

Private & Confidential

Mrs Jenny Wallace
Head of Paid Service
Torrige District Council
Riverbank House
Bideford
EX39 2QG

Dear Mrs Wallace,

1/0442/2017/OUT: Demolition of existing village hall and erection of two dwellings
1/0441/2017/OUT: Proposed new community hall

I wish to register a formal complaint concerning the conduct of the Plans Committee meeting at Bideford on 6th July 2017. At this meeting, the above planning applications from Thornbury Hamlets Parish Council, in respect of its desire to provide a new community hall, were heard.

I write in my capacity as the editor of the parish newsletter and the manager of our community website and Facebook group. I believe this gives me a good insight into the feelings of the community on this issue. I spoke for my allotted three minutes, in favour of Thornbury being allowed to build a new community hall, and I enclose a copy of my submission as an appendix to this letter.

This was my first experience of a Plans Committee meeting, and I was surprised that at no point did the Chair acknowledge or directly address any of the points made by those who spoke in support of the two applications. This was particularly surprising when reference was made to a Supreme Court judgement which I understand is pertinent to the application of planning guidelines in such a case. A strong impression was given that nothing that could have been said on the day could alter the decision being made. Considering the statement made by the Chair in her preamble to the meeting regarding the desire to foster public engagement, it seems we all wasted our time.

Overall, the conduct, attitude and comments of those members opposing the applications seemed to me to be based on poor-supported assumptions and prejudices, and did not address the key aspects of planning guidelines and their interpretation. The body language of these members spoke volumes: a failure to make eye contact with public speakers and a sense that they were hardly listening at all.

Statements were made during discussion, to the effect that the old hall was “repairable” or “in quite good order” and “could serve our needs” which flew in the face of independent expert evidence that the hall is not economically repairable, is of inadequate size and lacks sufficient parking space. This

was never acknowledged, nor were such statements challenged by the Chair. This was followed by statements that we “do not need a hall at all”, since we are close to Bradford, so they seemed to want to ensure that the applications failed on as many grounds as possible. The persistent questioning by one member, about the ownership of the proposed new site for a hall and the application of the proceeds of sale from the old site, was in my view irrelevant to the cases in hand, and seemed designed to throw up a smokescreen to create uncertainty and doubt, in place of a mature discussion of the policies and other facts that were pertinent to the cases.

By contrast, the comments of those members who spoke in favour of the applications were open and supportive of the community and its needs, and seemed willing to understand that Thornbury has an active social life and needs a focal point, as has been approved for all other communities in the area. That includes a green-field site at Bradford & Cookbury.

The issue of the proposed new site being mostly brown-field (which I understand it is, to some 75%) seemed to embarrass the Planning staff, and they tried to gloss over it, or state that it is ‘mostly green-field’. This was disingenuous, and the Case Officer made very little effort to justify any of his points, other than falling back on bald references to policy. When challenged on this by the Chair of Thornbury Hamlets Parish Council and their planning consultant in their submissions, their points were ignored by committee members.

The solicitor for Torridge District Council also seemed embarrassed, possibly because he had not been consulted on the wording of the proposed ‘106’, and he avoided the questions about the application of the proceeds from the sale of the old hall site: whilst not strictly pertinent to the applications, this issue is at the heart of the combined approach of these two applications, and ignoring it showed lack of openness and willingness to understand Thornbury’s rationale.

The Chair’s closing comments, alluding to the proposition that Thornbury does not need its own hall, and specifically regarding the state of the road from Thornbury to Bradford (via Bason Farm) totally ignored the appalling state of the Thornbury to Lashbrook road, which people from Brendon, South Wonford and Woodacott would naturally use. You may be interested to learn that both of the roads in question were closed by flooding today (21st July) following torrential rain.

Apparently reacting to residents’ comments in written submissions that the old hall has become an “eyesore”, The Chair also alluded to the fact that there are plenty of other “eyesores” in the area (mentioning the tin-clad barn and the “house with all the scaffolding that looks like its been there for years” at Windy Cross. This was unprofessional and opinionated, and I believe showed her true colours: clutching at any argument that ignored the facts of the case (such as current interpretation of policy) that could be dispassionately evaluated.

In summary, those opposed seem to have decided before the meeting how they would vote, and were not at all interested in any the evidence that was presented to them concerning compliance with policy, the recent Supreme Court decision, the proven demand within Thornbury (via attendance at local events) for a hall, and the documented support for same in the community, via the Parish Plan. If this is what “open government” looks like, taking the views and wishes of the public into account, then my opinion of the conduct of such matters in Torridge is now considerably lower than when we started.

I conclude that either the majority political grouping had decided that the applications should fail for their own personal or party reasons, or they genuinely believe that communities like Thornbury Hamlets are of no importance, and do not need to be listened to.

In either case, it's a sad reflection on the state of local politics in Devon that a rural district council such as Torrington is prepared to allow us to wither, for their own narrow ends.

Please acknowledge receipt of this letter (I can be emailed at paul@taylor.it) and I look forward to hearing from you further in respect of the progress of this complaint.

Yours sincerely,

Paul Taylor

cc: Mr A K Hutchings, Chair, Thornbury Hamlets Parish Council

Appendix 1: Submission to Plans Committee in respect of 1/0441/2017/OUT: Proposed new community hall at Thornbury.

In support of a new Community Hall for Thornbury

Madam Chairman. My name is Paul Taylor, and I am a resident of Thornbury Hamlets, I am the editor of the parish newsletter, and the manager of the village web site and Facebook group - so I believe I have my finger on the pulse of the community and its needs.

Through these media, and at a public meeting held to announce the plans for a new hall, we have sought to engage the community and judge the level of support for this application. From most of the opinions expressed at the meeting, and through the number of letters of support received, we are convinced that a new hall such as the one proposed, that is local to our residents, is in demand and will be well used.

So, is Thornbury an active community? Well, on the past three weekends, Thornbury has hosted a Cider and Pasty Walk attended by 70 people, an

all-you-can-eat Sunday afternoon Pudding Club for 50, and a Fun Day and Dog Show attended by at least 80 people. Not bad for a community of some 120 households.

Last year, a celebration for the 90th Birthday of the Queen brought together 60 residents, but the lack of a suitable hall meant that we met in tents in a parishioner's garden – far from ideal, given North Devon's weather!

So, the community spirit is there, and the need for a modern facility at the heart of the village is clear.

One of the greatest challenges facing our society today is an aging population, and Thornbury is no exception. The relative affordability of housing and the popularity of Devon as a retirement destination means that we have increasing numbers of senior citizens. But with aging comes the risk of social isolation. Public Health England and Age UK have recognised the importance of interventions designed to minimise social isolation, including easy access to local centres with good facilities. Activities such as exercise classes and coffee mornings can bring people together informally, computer classes can help them stay connected with friends and family, whilst more active pursuits such as skittles or short mat bowls can keep aging bodies fit.

As folk grow older, we can also see that whilst they are prepared to drive a short distance to events, longer trips outside the parish can discourage them, as does the lack of adequate toilet facilities. Whilst ours is a geographically extended community, the planned location at Windy Cross sits conveniently at the heart of the Hamlets.

Today, Thornbury has no facility suitable for parish meetings held in the cold days of Winter, since both the Church and the Chapel lack adequate heating. The Parish Council, the PCC and other bodies need somewhere to meet that will encourage public engagement and discussion.

So, in summary, Thornbury Hamlets is an active and engaged community, which wants to build on its success to ensure that there is a thriving village for future generations. We believe a central element of that future is our own hall, as a focal point for all ages.

(ends)