

The Barton  
Thornbury  
Holsworthy  
Devon  
EX22 7DD

1/0442/2017/out

1/0441/2017/out

Dear Jenny Wallace

I am writing to you, in connection with, the site visit to Thornbury and the subsequent Plans Committee for the above Planning applications. Those members of the Parish Council, who attended the site visit and the members of the Parish Council and Speakers who attended the Plans Committee, were so appalled by the demeanour and lack of respect shown by the Plans Committee, that the Parish Council unanimously voted to put in a formal complaint to Torridge District Council. We therefore ask you to please investigate the following:-

#### **The Site Visit**

Two members of the Committee entered the hall and sat on a bench talking. They did not take any part in assessing the site both inside and out. Another Councillor claimed that the damage internally had been done deliberately. As the former Chair of the PC holds the key, I question what are we being accused of. The back of the building has the worst weather damage, where there are large cracks and possible structural damage. Two surveyors were employed at separate times to professionally assess and report on the building and its structural safety. They would have needed to remove some ceiling panels to gain access to the roof area. This report was part of our submission. I question the appropriate professional technical expertise of the Committee Members who offered derogatory comments and that in their opinion the property was salvageable. When they decided to leave I had to ask them to look at the rest of the building including the North wall where the main problems with the building are. They had missed this part of the building and the land behind which is partly overgrown and needs to be inspected on foot to assess the boundary. This land has come to the Parish Council in an out of court settlement. A couple of councillors and Ben entered the site, with one Councillor stating that the PC did not own the land. I informed them again about the out of court settlement of which Jamie Hollis had long been informed about. The other Councillors returned to the transport ready to move on not being prepared to access the rest of the site. Our comment is: what constitutes a site visit?

#### **The Plans Committee - Bideford Town Hall July 6<sup>th</sup> 2017**

Those attending on behalf of Thornbury Parish noted the obvious disinterest of the Councillors on the Plans Committee, as they were not engaging with the submissions put forward in support. The Councillors were looking around making faces and giving a very negative body language. This was noted by residents who had never attended a planning meeting before but are respected in their respective roles in the Parish as follows:-

Treasurer of Thornbury Parish Church

Chair of the Parish Plan Committee

Editor of the Parish Magazine

Chair of the Parish Council

The Agent acting for Thornbury Parish Council

The consensus of the above speakers and those others in attendance, who were not even part of the Thornbury application was that they were uncomfortable with the lack of respect shown by the Committee. The obvious negativity towards another local government body, (the Parish Council) was incomprehensible in this context where improvement of facilities for the community was the object of the exercise. I understand that on previous occasions where applications have been brought by and for a Parish Council for the welfare of its community the Committee have argued overwhelmingly in favour. I ask what was the motivation for their negative decision on this occasion given that the Planning Officer in his report had stated, if the committee is minded to approve..... a sure sign that on balance he would comply.

One would have expected the Chair to have raised some salient points from our presentations even for appearance sake, as I understand she is an experienced Chair. I wonder why she did not pick up on the recent Supreme Court ruling in May, brought forward in one of the submissions, which could have affected their decision. Why did they not discuss the positive pre-app and previous Planning Officer's different interpretation of what is possible. I know there has been a huge turnover of officers in the planning department and again I question why. There was no mention of our professionally prepared independent report on the non- viability of the old hall which was central to the case. The only intervention the Chair made on the two applications was to comment on the ease of access to Bradford Village Hall and to denigrate the area around the new Village Hall site. She complained about the derelict property opposite the site which was owned by a long-time resident before his death and the rusty scaffolding on a refurbishment by a young local lad who is working on the house evenings and weekends when possible. He is a 28 year old, who organised the village fete last week raising £800 for the community. Again, a complete lack of respect by the Chair.

The Councillor for Broadwood kept asking where is the money going, and who owns the land. I understand these are irrelevant questions in consideration of a planning application, but no one picked him up on this. Again this shows a lack of knowledge of planning approval process. This is the same Councillor who in his opinion thinks there was nothing wrong with the Old Hall. What is his expertise against a professional surveyor? He also asked where the Priory was situated, in respect of, the two proposed new houses. Having attended the site visit he already knew this fact.

There were assertions made at committee that the Old Hall could be refurbished. The committee again were not listening to the submissions during which they were told that an architect had drawn up plans which had been costed before the decision was even made to sell the Old Hall which proved the project was not viable. No one was listening. We as the applicant had to employ qualified surveyors to present building and wildlife reports, who in planning or on the committee have these qualifications or has written an independent report? They appear to be instant experts who can refute the true expert's findings at will. I would expect an experienced Chair to challenge the veracity of such statements made by his or her committee and discuss the expert's opinion. As this did not happen it became obvious to the audience that the decision had been pre-determined and our part in this charade was irrelevant.

Much was made of the use of a green field site (which is actually a brown field site) and the proximity of the Bradford Village Hall, which as it happens was built on a green field site originally part of a 17 acre parcel of land. As Chair of Governors of the primary school at Bradford, adjacent to that field, I kept in close touch with the Bradford Hall committee through this project. There was no problem getting planning approval in this case from Torridge. I also note that in the next consultation for the Local Plan Torridge is calling for brown field sites to be identified and brought forward. As the Old Hall was previously identified as an exception site and the site of the new Hall is a brown field site I wonder again why we were turned down!

I would also like to question the motives of the Councillor who was prepared to call in the New Village Hall application and who was prepared to discuss the possible 106 outcome with me, I presumed that he must have already had this discussion with the District Solicitor or Planning Officer. He also stated that he looked forward to visiting Thornbury and meeting the Parish Council as he was all for community improvement. I and another Parish Councillor had already had a two hour meeting with Jamie Hollis to discuss a 106 condition before submitting our applications. None of this was mentioned in the planning report or at committee. The said Councillor unfortunately went on holiday omitting to call in the application before he left. On his return, he attended plans committee and voted against the application. What can I say, I can only presume his holiday was on the road to Damascus, his conversion to opposing the application being of Biblical proportions.

With the distinct paucity of meaningful or qualified debate and the obvious lack of engagement with the applications it appeared obvious that certain members of the committee were pre-determined to refuse. I feel very sorry for the parishioners who gave up their time and energy to support their community. Their opinion of the process was that it was biased and intransigent and that the conduct of the committee was not fit for purpose. The decision had been pre-determined by the committee even though, throughout the planners report he gave room for approval as he realised that Councillors work for their communities in Torridge, including Thornbury. The decision went against all of the committee's normal principles, unless of course there was an underlying prejudice that we were not privy to. If so then this should be thoroughly investigated as there is no room in Council for revenge decisions where the public and council tax payers are concerned. This is bringing TDC into disrepute.

In conclusion, I and the Parish Council feel that there is a case to answer and look forward to a meaningful discussion on the issues we have highlighted and any which you uncover in your investigations.

Yours sincerely,

Chair of Thornbury Parish Council