

Date: 27 November 2007**Report: REPORT OF THE MEMBER CHAMPION FOR PLANNING**

I am really enjoying being the Member Champion for Planning. To be frank and honest I approached the July AGM of the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority (YDNPA) thinking that if I was not able to secure a place on the Planning Committee for the next 12 months, I would not put in for a Member Champion position, but instead have a sabbatical year just attending the 2 monthly Authority meetings, and the odd Committee meeting. Perhaps some of my colleagues might have preferred had I done this !!

Perversely (in a way) it was the decision to allow Members of the Planning Committee to be Member Champions as well – if there were vacancies – that changed my thinking and introduced me to the world of Member Championing. The decision made the way for the best of both worlds, to remain on the Planning Committee, clearly a priority for this County, District and Parish Councillor who lives, works and travels amongst local communities deep in the Park, and to make a contribution to the highly commendable Member Champion initiative to increase member involvement within the wider work of the Authority.

Once I felt members of staff in the Planning Department had had time to recover from the shock of the identity of their new Member Champion for Planning I risked ringing Peter Watson up to start the ball rolling. We agreed a work programme for the first period up to the November Authority meeting that would require me to give 4 morning or afternoon sessions of my time as Member Champion. As it so happens it will end up as more than that, but I am happily coping with the time commitment and being a member of the Planning Committee at the same time, especially as the Committee meetings are now regularly finished around lunchtime. This is due to increased delegation to officers, and so the meetings feature a much smaller number of applications than in the past, and thus less reading of reports and other documentation in advance.

I have always been interested in planning and development control during my time on the YDNPA and I have taken up previous opportunities to job shadow. I remember an interesting afternoon with Walt Foreman, a former Enforcement Officer, and a visit to a wild boar farm in the South of the Park that seemed to be conspicuously short of wild boar. In fact it was absolutely pig-less, one of the reasons for the call by Walt.

When the opportunity came to be on the Best Value Review of Development Control, in 1999, I grasped it and joined Harold Brown, Gill Travis, and a number of planning officers on a Review that took several months to complete. The Review provided a very useful opportunity to acquire a really good working knowledge of the in and outs of the Planning Department. In a way as Member Champion I am picking up the baton where I left it some 7 years ago.

I was surprised to learn in the Review that there were many members of the Authority who had never called into Planning Department, yet sat monthly in judgement on much of its work as members of the Planning Committee. Living, working and travelling in the heart of the Park, planning issues seem to have a habit of finding me and most weeks throughout my 11 years on the Authority I have been in contact with the Planning Department trying to assist a constituent or constituents in my role as a local Councillor.

My first session as Member Champion was the monthly debriefing for the officers of the Planning Department that follow the Planning Committee the previous day. In my case it was the September Committee meeting. All those requests that members make, during the course of a Planning Committee (myself included), in the space of a sentence or two are translated the next day into action points and tasks to be taken forward by officers, sometimes at the cost of considerable time and resource. I was impressed that given the unstructured way debates can progress at the Planning Committee, nothing was missed and officers left the debriefing to get on with the individual tasks that had been delegated to them.

The debriefing allows an opportunity for other members of staff to speak en-bloc to the officers of the Planning Department and in September Joyce Whiteley and Irene Brannon came along to talk about the YDNPA Procurement Strategy.

My next session was with the planning technicians, an efficient and effective team of officers that I (and many others) have always found to be extremely user-friendly. Tracey Lambert introduced me to her colleagues and I spent an enjoyable morning looking at the nuts and bolts of the planning application process – this is much more complicated than occasionally meets the eye. Of course their work is far more grounded in state of the art Information Technology than it was at the time of the Best Value Review.

One of the recommendations of the Review was that the Planning Technicians were a relatively untapped resource, and could take some of the pressure off the Planning Officers, and we proposed a programme of up-skilling and training to address this. That recommendation was obviously followed and being a Planning Technician now is much more demanding (and interesting) than in the past, relying heavily on the latest IT and communication media skills.

I spent a morning with Peter Watson, Head of Planning, and in an interesting discussion together we covered a range of planning and planning department issues, both current and those soon to come on the radar screen. The main issue currently is going to be the pressure on planning application processing and enforcement targets caused by the departure of a planning officer and (for the time being) the reduced availability of another. On top of this the full time enforcement officer is not to be replaced, and one of the two part time enforcement officers will soon be on maternity leave.

Clearly this type of coincidence can cause a difficulty in any organisation that relies very heavily on staffing resources. However it comes just at the time that our Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority Planning Service is Number One Star amongst the National Park family for Planning Performance. What a turnaround from being a Standards Authority (in my view unjustly so) last year !! Members at the November Planning Committee highly commended the Planning Department and all its staff for the eye-watering-target-beating quarterly performance figures reported in the Agenda.

It may be inevitable that performance will dip whilst the staffing issues I mention are addressed. Peter (wryly) said he will do his absolute best to point out that any reduction is entirely coincidental with the appointment of a new Member Champion for Planning !!

I have also attended the final Planning Performance Working Group which dealt with 3 issues that had been causing a degree of discomfort for members, and been consulted by both Peter Watson and Richard Daly on reports involving planning that they are bringing to future meetings of the Planning Committee and the Authority respectively. As a member of the YDNPA I have never been offered this type of consultation in the past, and I found it very refreshing, a definite plus for the role of a Member Champion.

My next assignments as Member Champion will be to go to the South of the Park and sit in at one of Planning Surgeries being held there with a Planning Officer, and to spend a morning with Dave Parrish visiting a quarry as part of his regular and routine monitoring of quarries.

I am eagerly looking forward to those assignments and I will report on them and any other involvement as Member Champion for Planning in my next report which will be made to the March 2008 meeting of the Authority.

John Blackie
Member Champion for Planning

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