

Ashtead Independents

Newsletter

Issue No 27

The Ashtead Independents are an independent group of local Mole Valley District and Surrey County Councillors working for the good of Ashtead without National political party ties.



March 2018

Leader's Letter



Fellow Residents,

I became involved in local politics in 2015, in order to contribute to addressing the concerns of Ashtead residents, not least with regard to the character of the area, its environment, and health care. Ashtead is fortunate to have

a long history of dedicated independent Councillors, working for the interests of residents, in collaboration with the Ashtead Residents Association. Six of the seven Ashtead seats on Mole Valley District Council are now occupied by Independents.

I was elected Leader of the Informal Independent Group in Mole Valley District Council in January, and of the Ashtead Independents last month. I am proud to be entrusted with leading such a committed, extremely able, and energetic group of individuals listening to, and determined to do their best for, the community.

We are a strong voice in the Council Chamber, and our diverse expertise means that we are well-placed to question and challenge decisions and policies brought forward by the Conservative-led District Council or Council Officers, and there are enough of us to ensure representation on all key Council committees and panels.

We advise on numerous matters of local concern, of which parking and planning are always to the fore, and as our County Councillor is an Ashtead Independent we are fortunate in having a route to County Hall where responsibilities for education and highways and broader social issues lie. All of us are ready to learn of issues from individuals or groups and to assist in their resolution where we can. We are always available at the end of an e-mail or phone, or if you prefer visit us privately or at one of our monthly drop-in sessions (see back page).

There will be an election for one seat in each of the three Ashtead wards on 3rd May. We will look forward to your continued expression of support for the Ashtead Independents then, and to continuing to work on your behalf for a better Ashtead.

David L Hawksworth

How many houses do we really need?

The existing Local Plan for Mole Valley District Council is out of date and a new one is being prepared. This has to be based on an "Objective Assessment of Housing Need". To calculate this figure, the Council commissioned a firm of consultants, "Cobweb Consulting" who used standard techniques, but did not have up-to-date and complete data. They arrived at a figure for housing need of 391 homes per year, stressing that this should only be a starting point for discussion. However, the Conservative Administration simply multiplied 391 by 15 (the 15 years covered by the plan), to arrive at a figure of 5,900 homes, and used this in the consultation and publicity even though it was strongly challenged by your Independent Councillors and others.

A careful reading of the Consultants' report showed that there was little actual need in Mole Valley, but a large demand from outsiders. Following a presentation by Cobweb Consulting it emerged that our challenge was valid, and furthermore that (a) the population in Mole Valley was stable, (b) there were only 48 homeless and 419 "concealed households", and (c) without the building of dedicated social housing in Mole Valley, those on modest incomes would never afford to buy a home.

In our view the Future Mole Valley consultation was deeply flawed, because:

- It implied that the figure of 5,900 had been agreed by the Council, and that it would help those wishing to downsize or get on the housing ladder;
- there was no mechanism for avoiding multiple submissions, and there was no record of the geographical distribution of consultees;
- there was no opportunity for a consultee to state that there should be no development on green field sites, and
- it ignored the fact that 77 % of Mole Valley is protected countryside.

At the Council meeting in December, the inadequacy of the consultation was acknowledged and a motion was passed which obliged the Administration to involve all Members in scrutinising future development of the new Local Plan.

Your Independent Councillors are anxious that the needs of residents are addressed, but not the demand from those wishing to move here from outside the district for the convenience of commuting. There will be another consultation exercise later in 2018 and, hopefully, this will be more open about what is, and is not, the housing demand. We trust that the next attempt will be better devised and executed to ensure more meaningful conclusions.

Patricia Wiltshire



Role of independent councillors

As Independent Councillors, we see our role as vital in providing an objective and professionally informed view on Council issues. Only Ashted regularly returns independent councillors to MVDC, though there is currently a seventh as a Conservative Councillor decided to become independent last year. With seven of 41 Councillors being independent, we can never expect to form a majority so you may well ask:

Why vote Independent - you can never form an Administration?

or:

Why vote Independent - you have no group policies?

The short answer to the first objection is - yes, we can! We did this for the three years from 2012 to 2015 while there was a hung council, with Chris Townsend serving as Leader. As the current Conservative administration has a majority of just one, we could find ourselves in a similar position after the May elections!

To the second question we say - yes it is true we have no group policies. We are independent from each other as well as from the national parties. We do not have a group view, but we do discuss issues together. It is obvious that no one group or party has a monopoly on the right answers; and further no group or party can ever be of one mind on all issues. Our approach is that each issue should be discussed in the appropriate forum, and each Councillor should make up their own mind. In the end the majority view should prevail without being distorted by Members being obliged to follow a party line. In that way decisions made are more likely to reflect views of the electorate.

Unfortunately this won't happen while the party system prevails in Local Government. So we say - we need more independent councillors all across the District!

Simon J Ling

Centenary Wood Planning Application

An application has been submitted by the Woodland Trust for a car park and Visitor Centre associated with the Centenary Wood currently being developed on the Langley Vale Farm site. The wood is one of four in the UK, one in each country, commemorating the centenary of the First World War.

The visitor centre is located almost exactly at the junction of three Local Planning Authorities, Mole Valley, Epsom & Ewell, and Reigate & Banstead. The entrance and car park are in Mole Valley, just off the Headley Road, south of the turning into Downs Road to Langley Vale. Although the foundation of the Wood is generally welcomed, the location of the car park and Visitor Centre is expected to bring its own problems particularly traffic issues given the narrow access lanes from the A24 through Ashted (particularly Park Lane and Farm Lane).

There are also concerns over having new buildings in the Green Belt, the lack of attention to ancient woodland remnants on the site, the planting regimes, and possible damage to archaeological features, including the ancient bank that formerly separated Ashted from Epsom

Residents can still submit documents to the MVDC planning website (MO/2018/004) until the case is heard by the Development Control Committee. The stage which the application will have reached when you read this is not known, but be assured that your Independent councillors are taking a close interest.

Simon J Ling

Mary P Cooper

SCC Allocation of Funds to County Councillors

Although Surrey County Council reduced the amount of the Local Allocation to Councillors by approximately half, good use was made of my £6,000 this year. Both Barnett Wood School and St. Giles School received sums for individual school projects; Ashted Cricket Club for a junior bowling machine; Ashted Library for a book drop; and Ashted Youth Centre supporting a holocaust extremism project.



Ashted Library

This year there were restrictions imposed on the use of the allocation, and assisting with tree planting and providing grit bins did not qualify. However in the coming year many restrictions have been removed and a specific sum has been ear-marked for highways work alongside the usual Community funds.

Please do get in touch if you feel you have a project that needs some small financial support in 2018/19.

Chris Townsend

Planning Applications

Since we last wrote, Planning applications have been continuing to flood into MVDC. We have two seats on the Development Control Committee (David Hawsworth and Peter Stanyard), and any of the rest of us can serve as substitutes if they are unavailable. We have been instrumental in getting various proposals turned down or approved in the best interests of our residents, often against the recommendations the Council's officers.



Woodfield Lane site for ten flats with no offstreet parking

In addition, we as Ashted Councillors have written to appeal inspectors regarding our strong objections to the Woodfield Lane development proposals and others. In these cases we feel that they fail to comply with our Ashted Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP) or existing MVDC core policies.

However you should be aware that we have been placed in an increasingly difficult position with government policy National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) advising that local authorities should identify and update annually a supply of deliverable sites sufficient to supply five years' worth of housing against their housing requirement plus a 5% buffer. MVDC's Core Strategy 2009 is now considered outdated. If we use the much contested Strategic Housing Market Assessment 2016 (see above) our figures would equate to 2.82 year supply. It now appears our core strategy is being considered out of date in many recent appeal cases. The consequence is that the NPPF advises permission should be granted unless any adverse impacts of doing so would demonstrably outweigh the benefits; or specific policies in the NPPF would restrict development i.e. Green Belt, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), heritage, flooding.

The new local plan will include a new 5 year housing target, and this SHOULD take into account the constraints outlined above, but it could mean applications for development will be EVEN MORE contentious.



Parking Restrictions

Surrey County Council's programme of changes for the current year is due to be implemented over the coming months, and hopefully will be completed by April. All representations to the Consultation were considered and funding has been found to implement them earlier than expected. One aspect that will be monitored closely will be the area of Grove Road and surrounding roads where residents requested a Resident Parking scheme; this will be the first such scheme in Ashted, and it will be interesting to see how this works in reality.

Chris Townsend

Parking Issues in Ashted

Recent planning applications have concentrated peoples' minds, but parking has steadily been turning into a major problem in the Village. Our station is a magnet for commuters from well outside Ashted, and a survey some time ago by the Residents' Association indicated that perhaps 50% of the users of our station had driven in from elsewhere. The station car park was expanded fairly recently but is nevertheless often full, in spite of being quite costly to use. We also have a number of businesses in Ashted, large and small, many of whose employees commute from elsewhere and sometimes use our streets for free parking.

There are problems around all our schools at drop off and collection times. Meanwhile residents without off street parking space often struggle to find nearby parking, and there are many stories of residents stuck in their own driveways by inconsiderate parking and of delayed emergency service or delivery vehicles. The situation is only likely to get worse as new properties are still being approved with little or no off-street parking, despite the recommendations in the Ashted NDP.



Excessive commuter parking with consequent verge damage

What is the answer? Nobody has yet found one. Further expansion of the station car park would have to be either upwards (a multi-storey) or downwards (underground) both of which are costly and have their disadvantages, not least that Network Rail is not interested. There is no obvious acceptable site for another surface car park, and Surrey County Council has a policy of not authorising residents' parking schemes except in roads where there is no off-street parking - and in any case they are not universally welcomed even by residents though there is one exception in Ashted (see article above).

Meter parking was emphatically rejected some years ago when mooted by Surrey County Council.

What are your views? Let us know and we will try to gauge support for anything that seems feasible!

Simon J Ling

Welsh Supermarkets and Leatherhead Office Blocks

MVDC spends annually around £22m on the services it provides. Of this about £13m is met by such things as car parking charges, garden bins, planning fees, and telecare charges. For the most part such charges just cover the cost of the services they enable. The funding gap of over £9m has historically been met by Council Tax and by Government in various ways - all of which have either disappeared or been severely restricted - and Council tax increases are limited by the Government; this year (2018/19) to 3%.

So for 2018/19, MVDC expects a funding shortfall of around £2.0m. It is hoped



Focal Point offices, Leatherhead a recent investment

that this can be filled by reducing costs and increasing income in three ways, each raising about £0.7m: (1) A new joint waste removal contract under which four authorities are jointly involved and which becomes effective for 2018/19; (2) The proposed increase in car parking charges from the current penny a minute to a pound an hour (this would be the first increase in Mole Valley for nine years); and (3) The Asset Investment Strategy which uses loan capital from the Public Works Loans Board to invest in commercial property and make a return.

This is where the Welsh supermarket and Leatherhead office blocks come in (these being two of the three properties bought so far). It is clearly risky, and may not be what many people expect their council to be doing, but there seems to be little choice in the current climate of austerity.

Simon J Ling

Marks & Spencer, Ashted and parking

Just before we went to press, the new Marks & Spencer Food Hall in Ashted opened on Wednesday 21 February 2018 - very exciting!

The M&S management met interested parties including Ashted Independent Councillors recently, to examine parking issues in the Ashted Peace Memorial Hall (APMH) and Grove Road car parks for residents, traders in The Street, and APMH users. Monitoring over eight months has shown that, with the exception of ADFAS mornings and one other day each month, there are spare spaces in APMH car park and there will be more when contractors' cars and cabins have been removed. Grove Road car park is generally only ever half full.

The M&S footfall and the proportion of car users is difficult to estimate; Ashted is unique. The best comparator is near Reigate and figures there would not overfill our two car parks.

It is not in the interest of Council Tax or Business Rate payers to run empty spaces. On this basis, it was decided that no precipitate action should be taken and that the situation during the early weeks of M&S trading would be monitored and then reviewed.



Ashted's new M&S Food Hall

Meanwhile your Independent Councillors are active on the Mole Valley Car Parks Review and will ensure that the resurfacing and remarking of the APMH car park is a top priority, as also is the installation of electric car charging points and a better payment system linked to actual time parked.

Increased car park charges are proposed by the Conservative administration on Mole Valley District Council. Your Ashted Independents will press for any increase to be spent on the car parks and for the introduction of short stay free parking to assist those who need a short sharp shop.

Peter Stanyard



How Scrutiny works

The Scrutiny Committee exists to give ordinary members of Council a chance to comment on forthcoming decisions by the Executive. The members are selected from each political group to reflect the composition of the full Council, but members of the ruling Executive are not allowed to be on it.

For the last three months of 2017, I was a member of a small panel set up by the Scrutiny Committee to review a specific decision by the MVDC Executive to obtain a further loan of £50m to be used to invest in commercial property to obtain rental income to replace the vanished Government grant. MVDC needs about £10m in funding each year, about £7m of which is met by Council tax. It is hoped that the investment programme will fill about £1.5m of this gap.

The purpose of the Panel was not to judge the investment decisions, but rather to ensure that the organisation itself is checking adequately. Much of our time was spent asking probing questions and trying to wrinkle out concerns and how they are being addressed. Council officers were very cooperative, and we got into a huge amount of detail.

The Panel, like Scrutiny itself, was politically balanced (3 Conservatives, 1 Liberal Democrat, and 1 Independent). It was annoying to see in early minutes of meetings phrases like 'a minority view was expressed by some members', and to realise that the majority was trying to marginalise views they didn't like. The Panel's remit is to be an assessment of the investment process, not a party political exercise.

When the Chair first presented the Panel's findings to Scrutiny, the Committee rejected the report due to a lack of consensus, so it was referred back to the Panel. This encouragement was just what was needed, as additional risks could be considered which otherwise would have been completely unmentioned, for example the implications of Brexit on any investment, or the effect of inflation on the terms of the lease. The final report was being considered by Council as we went to press.

For me, this was a worthwhile piece of work as a Councillor. In opposition, your views are frequently voted down and given little attention, but this Panel (and others like it*), if given the chance, do offer a forum in which to record areas of concern.

David J Harper

* A similar Panel, yet to report, is scrutinising the Planning Department. It is addressing topics that include conservation services, interactions with residents and Members, enforcement, peer review, performance, training, and the use of conditions placed on developments. David Hawksworth is the Independent member on this Panel.

From the Ashtead Residents Association



The ARA is a large, non-political organisation with over 6000 members. We have always supported Independent candidates in local elections. They act in the best interest of Ashtead as a community and have no party political ties. I served as Independent Councillor for Common Ward for 25 years, and I benefited greatly from the help and support I received from the ARA.

This strong working relationship has served Ashtead well for many years, and I hope for many more years to come. We all firmly believe that party politics have no place in Local Government.

Those of you who are new to Ashtead may wish to learn more about us. Go to www.ashteadresidents.org.uk/ We would be pleased to welcome you as a member.

Blanche Douglass

(President of the Ashtead Residents Association)

Contacts and Help

Our contact details appear below, and do not hesitate to get in touch on any matters of concern. You can also drop-in to see us at the Scout Hall (Woodfield) from 12.00-13.00 on the first Saturday of each month.

We will be offering a candidate in each of the three Ashtead Wards in the forthcoming elections, and would warmly welcome you if you feel able to deliver literature, canvass on our behalf, display a poster, or act as a "teller" at polling stations. We have to finance our newsletters and election materials ourselves, so even small financial contributions are always most welcome

In addition, we would be really interested to hear from anybody with Ashtead at heart who might consider standing for election as an Ashtead Independent.

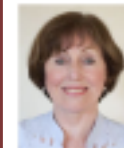
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