

# HOOK HEATH RESIDENTS' ASSOCIATION

## 2010 NEWSLETTER

Dear members and residents,

### A Bad Case of Schlimmbesserung

Hopefully having hooked your attention (*and for those unfamiliar with the term I will explain later*) I need firstly to make you aware of a potential sword of Damocles hanging over your future 'quality of life', and secondly put you on notice that I might need to ask for your support later this year. I would like you to imagine the possibility, - *and I stress the term possibility, not probability*, - of a Woking sixteen years hence which has tipped over from its current predominantly green environment into a high-rise Croydenised town centre with spreading urbanised sprawl and all the attendant environmental pollution, significant loss of greenbelt, private and public living space and trees, reduced prosperity and an appreciably larger social housing constituency. Do you recognise this picture (one of a number) from the Council's 'consultation' with you last year? Well you can be forgiven if you missed it, the public presentation being swamped with all those warm and seductive adjectives - *prosperous, attractive, buoyant, growing, popular, quality natural environment, and high quality of life*.



Now before I frighten you and the horses with this post apocalyptic vision of Woking's future I do wish to stress most earnestly that the HHRA is **not** saying that our description above **will** occur, - *we most sincerely hope not* - only that 'at the extreme' it is formally documented and on the Council's radar screen. You may feel, - and I would not criticize you one moment for such scepticism, - that I am being an '*agent provocateur*' and excessively perverse and unhelpful in my prognosis, particularly as your elected councillors all appear 'relaxed' about the Greenbelt and congregate around the low end of the development spectrum. So why are we so worried?

***The answer is quite simple, yet devastatingly frightening. Essentially, on analysis, we find the council's vision lacks expressed clarity, credibility and reasonableness, and is driven by a non-democratically tested assumption that continuous urbanisation is always desirable to promote your personal 'quality of living'. When combined, these observations make us uncertain and fearful for the future direction of our borough and our green environment. As a result the options put out to 'public consultation' by the Council are deficient in credence and any resultant replies are un-informed.***

This is a grievous charge and not one that we would wish to make lightly so let me explain. As a responsible residents' association we endorse the need for long term planning, and we wish to engage constructively in its development. We approach it from the touchstone of 'reasonableness', and would actively encourage readers to challenge us if they feel we overstep this boundary in our analysis. In discussion the council officers are invariably professional and courteous, and we are genuinely open to 'persuasion' through rational argument that our disquiet is unfounded. But so far they have not been able to substantiate their rationale and the local plan continues to be developed with, in our opinion, foundations built on sand.

Frankly there are many unclarified issues and non-sequiturs in the Council's document, but I can justify the assertion above on one simple, yet seminal, point. At the heart of the published core strategy there are 'five urbanisation scenarios' ranging from 4,700 to 17,500 new properties (increases in the housing stock of 12% & 46% respectively) over the planning period, the latter giving rise to our Damoclean vision. BUT, here is the killer fact. The whole vision - whatever

#### *Specific Items*

##### **Farnborough Airport.**

The application by TAG to almost double the number of permitted flights from 28,000 to 50,000 annually was refused by Rushmoor Borough Council against advice from the planning officers. All interested parties were given time to comment on the application and at a special meeting of the Development Control Committee councillors were seen to weigh the evidence, and in some cases to change their voting intentions. A subsequent appeal by TAG is currently being heard at a public enquiry.

#### **ASSOCIATION OFFICERS**

*For security reasons names and addresses have been removed from this web copy. They are all there on the original.*

scenario you choose - is predicated on a population rise of only c. 2½% over the sixteen year period. Now if I were to tell you that the most recent statistic from Surrey C.C. shows Woking's population growing by just under 1% in one year alone, and that the Office for National Statistics projects a 12% population increase for the borough over the planned period, – **almost 5 times more than the plan assumption**, - might you not feel some little sympathy for my incredulity. If you apply a fivefold multiplier to the 'existing' options then even the 'councillor preferred minimum scenario' escalates beyond our original doomsday vision, and the others, God forbid, expand beyond credence. The point that I am making is that the council's Vision & Core strategy is ill founded, and we cannot have any confidence in its sincerity. Consequently last year's much vaunted residents' consultation when they asked for your feedback on their proposals was uninformed and irrelevant.

So where do we go from here, and anyway in practice what influence can residents really have on their quality of living? Is it not a case of *qué será sera*? Yes, it is true that we live in a real planning world which often dictates from above, but nevertheless we cannot as a local democracy just lie back and let it happen. And anyway the political wind seems to be changing in the favour of localism. We need to grip the situation and ensure that the minds and hearts of our councillors (& officers) reflect the popular endorsed local vision not a mindless subservience to the current planning zeitgeist. We have had our successes. Some time ago we were told that our 'special area planning guidance' was off the agenda, but we now have reached a partial compromise with our particular Hook Heath features formally noted for contextual planning considerations. Our first objective in this current exchange must be to persuade the council, or an independent authority, to run a 'reality check' over the assumptions, and ultimately to articulate clearly (*as they are obligated to do under the code of recommended practice*) the prospects for Woking's future so that we, the residents, understand the challenges and can respond in an 'informed' manner.

And where was your association whilst all this was going on? Well when we attended the first day launch of the public consultation it was blatantly evident in the first few minutes that the document was 'suspect'. The council stressed how they wanted the public to engage in the process and proffered genuine collaboration. However when we asked them to extend the consultation timeframe so that we could reconcile the inconsistencies they were less enthusiastic and declined, noting that they were working to a fixed 'ambitious' timetable that precluded detailed scrutiny. Since then we have had a number of meetings and exchanges raising our concerns, but without any notable progress. We are told that we can have a second chance to comment later this year when the 'preferred level' of urbanisation is tabled before the council for acceptance, and at that time we will be asking for your input. For the moment however, now that the national elections are over we will be taking this issue up with our new member of parliament.

I will leave you, if I may, with an amusing anecdote. Those of us of a certain age may remember the episode in the *Hitch Hikers' Guide To The Galaxy* when the 'authorities' on the Frog Star extrapolated a 'vision' of the whole of the universe from a small piece of fairy cake. Well in a case of *real life* imitating *art*, believe it or not, Woking council's megatome 116 page response to us evidencing their 'vision' creation process included, no not a fairy cake, but a 'status pudding' (@51p + VAT if you are interested).

I will keep you informed of developments. Oh yes I nearly forgot 'schlimmbesserung' is the 'improvement that makes things worse'. Don't you just love the way the Germans have such apposite words!

**Jean Dare**, Chairman

## **Woking Tennis Club**

We were alerted by residents to plans to increase the number of floodlit courts and possibly extend the playing hours. Following representations from neighbours, we understand environmental surveys have revealed that some of the existing lights may not meet current standards. No planning application has been submitted yet.

## **Hedges**

Among the glories of Hook Heath are our trees and hedges, but please ensure that boundary hedges are kept reasonably trim so that pedestrians can use the pavements in safety.

**And finally**, my usual reminder at this time of year. Please be considerate of neighbours by keeping outdoor noise to a minimum.

### **Aims of the Association**

- 1) To preserve the present character of Hook heath and protect the local environment.
- 2) To provide members with help and assistance on matters affecting them, particularly in relation to letters of objection to the local Council or Public Enquiries.
- 3) To deal with planning matters that affect the area and are against the consensus of the opinion of residents.
- 4) To liaise with the council and all political parties to achieve an agreed status for Hook Heath which reflects the consensus of the opinion of the residents.
- 5) To be aware of local issues in adjoining areas which may have repercussions for Hook Heath, and to provide mutual support to adjacent Residents' Associations to fight plans which could be detrimental to the surrounding environment.
- 6) To care for other matters of common concern which arise from time to time, e.g. traffic, public services, security, trees, etc.