

Save Our Greenbelt Dinnington & Anston Action Group – a Short History

Preface

This document is not intended to be static. It will continue to be updated as the Action Group makes progress in pursuing of its aims.

Introduction

From a chance meeting of three local residents at a Local Development Framework consultation drop-in session held by Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council at North Anston in South Yorkshire the 'Save Our Greenbelt Dinnington & Anston Action Group' rapidly developed into a well organised, highly motivated and dynamic action group prepared to take on the might of the local council. This paper illustrates the development of the Action Group from conception to the current time and beyond, by sharing significant actions, agreements, its commitments and expectations.

Where the Action Group was

The Action Group started off rather hurriedly in an ad-hoc fashion with a few residents coming together at a RMBC 'consultation' drop-in session in July 2011 after hearing that 1100 new homes were to be built in the local area, with over 60% being on Greenbelt. Then, within a few days, the Group was rapidly transformed by developing a strong committee with a clear aim, that of 'No Building on the Greenbelt'. However, given time to reflect on the nature of LDF initiative, this single aim was replaced by 3 more wider-reaching aims:

- To protect Greenbelt land and other green spaces from non-essential development
- To encourage development of Brownfield sites as a priority
- To support development of social and affordable housing for the residents of Rotherham Borough.

Members of the Group met Dinnington ward councillors on Saturday 3rd September 2011 at a scheduled surgery and impressed upon the councillors the fears of the local community. Two of the outcomes of the meeting were:

- The councillors agreed to hold a public meeting to which officers of RMBC would be invited
- One councillor offered support for the Group's action and has done, and continues to do, much work on behalf of the Group, including liaising with RMBC and the local MP.

The meeting was organised by Dinnington ward councillors and took place on Friday 9th September 2011 at 7.15pm at the Monksbridge Community Centre. Below are extracts from the minutes of the meeting.

Ward Councillors Jacquie Falvey, Jane Havenhand and Simon Tweed.

No apologies from other Ward Members received.

Approximately one hundred Local Residents.

The meeting was chaired and facilitated by Vic Betts.

The Action Group Spokesman advised the meeting that they were eager to hear all concerns and that everyone should have their say.

Questions/comments from the Floor:

How many people knew of any proposed consultation regarding this matter? A show of hands only revealed four or five did

Can Dinnington cope with a large surge in population? "No way" was the unanimous reply from the residents

Will Developers go over the Council Planners heads to the Secretary of State to get their way if planning applications are turned down?

Will Social Housing Applicants in Dinnington get priority?

The population of Rotherham has seen relatively little change over the last twenty years (Around 250,000) so where are all these new residents supposed to be coming from?

Worries about future education for our kids after large scale development.

Strong objections to developing green field sites instead of using existing brown field sites

The Ward Members fully supported many of the views expressed by the residents and in particular their wish to retain the green belt untouched in the locality although did remind residents that they are part of the decision and policy making process but promised to take concerns back to the Planning Dept for consideration.

As soon as the views of the local community were sought regarding the use of Greenbelt for building it was clear that many residents wanted to volunteer to help fight against building on Greenbelt. The vast majority of the local community had serious and various concerns including:

Impact on local schools doctors surgeries and hospitals

Impact on local infrastructure including public transport, suitability of existing roads to take more traffic, road safety

Loss of open space, high value landscape, wildlife and wildlife habitat

Reduction in area of recreational land

Much of the preferred land for building being 'highest quality agricultural land in the Borough'

Reduction in the amount of crops produced

An increase in the carbon footprint of the area

Mass urban sprawl

The need for blasting on areas of the “Rock Bridge” (which has very hard underlying limestone) for the installation of infrastructure and services which may cause damage to existing homes and the subsequent release of methane over a period of time.

Homes located in geological depressions being flooded in the event of pumping station failures

An increased volume of water in Anston Brook causing environmental damage in the area of Anston Stones Wood, and causing a higher risk of flooding of the River Ryton in Worksop

The lack of transparency and publicity of the proposals and consultation process.

There was no doubt whatsoever that the majority of residents felt that the proposal of land that would support in excess of 3000 homes in Dinnington East was a ‘done deal’, with the consultation process merely a political exercise.

Ward and Parish?

As part of the consultation process the council requested the feelings of individuals in the area be expressed. On behalf of the local community, the Group used the feedback sought earlier from residents to compile a letter of objection to the building of homes on the Greenbelt. More than 1800 letters were signed within 10 days.

The council also requested questions of the local community as part of the consultation process, to which the Group initially raised 28 questions of a varied nature.

The Leader of the Council offered to meet with the Group during August, to which the Group thanked him and suggested a meeting at a later date when more information was available as being more appropriate. Some committee members favoured an early meeting whilst others preferred a later meeting, fearing that an early meeting would have the council bring out the best china, have a chat, give assurances and that would be that.

Following on from the public meeting held by the councillors, the first public meeting organised by the Group was held on Friday 7th October 2011, during which the Group presented:

- An overview of what has been done so far

- Details of problems that have been faced

- A summary of ongoing developments:

- An update of what the group is preparing to do in the future.

During the ‘open session’ of the meeting there was much concern and anger aimed at RMBC, including:

- A feeling that the Borough had chosen the Dinnington area on which to dump ‘that, which wouldn’t be tolerated elsewhere in the Borough’.

The issue of the 'consultation process' was ridiculed, particularly as only 1500 residents, Borough-wide, attended the drop-in sessions.

Being at the fringe of the Borough, it was voiced that residents paid taxes and had nothing in return from the Borough except waste collection. The bus service was considered very poor yet better than the condition of the roads.

Many in the hall identified with the town of Worksop as opposed to Rotherham.

As Dinnington has town status, there was a call for Dinnington and surrounding villages to become independent of Rotherham Borough raise its own taxes, outsource services (eg road maintenance) to local councils and companies.

What started as a presentation to urge the preservation of the Greenbelt and build on Brownfield sites was developed by the 'floor' into a discussion of the wide-ranging failure of RMBC in respect of the welfare of Dinnington and the surrounding area.

One key issue, which was agreed in principle, was the content of a letter to be sent to the Council. This 'letter of opposition' was signed by over 700 residents and sent to the Chief Executive of the Council. The letter expressed some of the feelings of the local community and a clear statement regarding any development:

"I support:

Building on Brownfield land with priority being given to derelict and overgrown land
New builds to be complementary in style and purpose to any existing homes in the locale

Where building on Greenbelt cannot be avoided at any cost, preference should be given to scrub or grassland whilst retaining traditional recreation areas. Any building on agricultural land to be restricted to the lowest quality land

At least 25% of new builds within the Borough being categorised as 'affordable' or 'social' until the lack of housing within the Borough has eased

Priority being given to the needs of Rotherham Borough residents when allocating 'social' housing and other vacant properties.

I Oppose:

Building on Greenbelt land whilst any Brownfield sites remain undeveloped
Unnecessary building of factory units until vacant ones are utilised."

Many residents added their own comments and attached notes to the letter.

The Leader of the Council requested a meeting with the Group, which was accepted. On the 3rd of November 2011 the meeting took place with the following councillors and officers present:

Councillors:

Roger Stone (Leader of the Council)
Jacquie Falvey (Dinnington)
Jane Havenhand (Dinnington)
Simon Tweed (Dinnington)

Darren Hughes (Anston).

Officers:

Chief Executive

Strategic Director

Strategic Policy Team Leader.

In the cordial meeting, where many issues were discussed, the Leader of the Council and the Chief executives agreed with the content of the letter regarding the use of land for the building of homes. The Group agreed to the suggestion of the Chief of the Council to work with the Strategic Director and Strategic Policy Team Leader to arrive at meaningful answers to the question raised by the Group earlier in the year. At the first meeting the officers proposed that the Group, using local knowledge, could contribute by suggesting land parcels for building on, a proposal that the Group accepted.

The Group have established a sound working relationship with senior officers of the council during several meetings aimed at reducing the need for Greenbelt land and providing answers to the Group's questions.

During the summer and autumn the Group had success with several articles in the local newspapers and broadcasts on local radio. The web site is also well subscribed having recorded more than 7000 'hits' since Christmas 2011.

Group members have met formally with the local MP who has asked questions of ministers and local council on behalf of the Group.

Members of the group have been interviewed and have provided input to research projects of the BBC and Oxford University.

Where the Action Group is

Although the title includes the words "Action Group", the way the Group has behaved, in the main, can be more closely associated with that of a 'lobby group'. Much progress has been made toward fulfilling the aims of the Group by working with the officers of the local council, raising awareness of local residents and soliciting the support of local councillors and MP. It must be said that 'Lobbying' doesn't sit too well with some members who would prefer a more aggressive campaign. What is important to all members is the achievement of the three aims by dealing with issues in a rational and democratic way, much more so than exploiting individual views and feelings.

The local community is still anxious about the proposed building on the Greenbelt. Some residents are much concerned whilst others are simply 'angry'. The question must be raised as to what degree the proposed building on Greenbelt has had on the voting pattern in Dinnington and Anston of the local election of 3rd May 2012, especially in the light of the national trend toward Labour.

Some residents are so concerned about the proposed loss of Greenbelt to housing that they asked for advice on which councillors were opposed to building and supported the Group's aims. Understandably, the Group explained the reasons why it couldn't give advice, one way or the other. Perhaps it is worthy of note that the Group have, several times in the past, been requested

to have members stand in local elections. The Group is adamant that the fight to minimise the risk to the Greenbelt is best achieved by not being involved in local politics.

Members of the local community are still finding out about the consultation process. Concerns are being voiced almost daily, some being new and others being voiced many times, to Group member, including:

Landowners, who claim to be 'custodians of the countryside', can't wait to sell their land to developers

Developer intimidating residents in an attempt to seize part of their land where it adjoins a preferred development site (as shown July 2011)

According to RMBC figures, out of the projected population increase of 22,000 to year 2027, 18,500 will be over the age of 60 and 2700 will be aged 19 and under. These figures indicate: that family size is increasing; accommodation for the aged should be increased (which would in turn release houses for growing families): the need to build 12000 houses for an extra 18,500 over 60's and 2.700 under 19 just does not add up. RMBC should re-appraise the housing quota

Why can't the council build the right type of housing for the right people in the right places?

If the population of Rotherham is not increasing substantially where are the extra people coming from to fill these new homes?

Is it true that Sheffield overspill is being dropped on to Rotherham?

Why should our Greenbelt be lost just so that the unemployed from London can be sent to live in social housing up here?

Why do so many new homes have to be built in the Dinnington area when there are at least 300 homes empty?

We would ask that RMBC look again at the proposed housing target for this area and also take into account the large number of empty properties in the Rotherham Borough.

It is clear from some of the concerns above relate to Borough-wide issues, not just local issues.

The Group has a formal constitution, bank account and treasurer.

A team is currently analysing the answers given by RMBC to the group's questions raised in response to the consultation process.

On Wednesday 25th April 2012 the Group had a meeting with the Strategic Director and the Strategic Policy Team Leader at which ward councillors Jacquie Falvey, Jane Havenhand, Darren Hughes and Simon Tweed, were present.

The Group submitted its proposals for the allocation of land for LDF based on the agreement with the Chief Executive and Leader of the Council in November 2011. These proposals:

Identify many more hectares of Brownfield sites than the original consultation proposals did

Include sufficient land to support more than 150% of housing demanded by LDF, thus giving the council greater scope for selection

Make minimal use of grassland and lower quality agricultural land

Demonstrate no requirement to use any high quality agricultural land

Do not identify any land that increases the catchment area of Anston Brook and the River Ryton thus not increasing the flood risk to the residents and businesses of Worksop.

The council representatives welcomed the submission from the Group, are committed to consider it in detail, with a view to contributing to the next consultation document, and provide feedback in the near future. The Group appreciates that not all areas of land submitted may be suitable for development because of technical reasons.

Copies of the submission were also distributed to the local MP, the Leader and to the Chief Executive of the Council.

Have identified much more space on Brownfield sites than the original consultation documentation.

Local newspapers the Dinnington Guardian and Rotherham Advertiser demonstrated much interest in publishing a report of the submission, whilst welcoming news on future developments. At a recent committee meeting a decision was made to include the Sheffield Star and Yorkshire Post in the Group's media list.

A wide-reaching proposal document is being considered by the local MP

Several committee members have been on a 'Localism Bill' training course with a view to incorporating any relevant aspects into the Group's strategy.

Commitments of the Action Group

Within the aims of the Group, the Group are committed to:

- Continue to solicit the view of the local community
- Represent the views of the local community
- Make representation to neighbouring councils and central government as necessary
- Make representation to developers and land owners as necessary
- Seek to reduce the need of more homes in the area
- Keep the community well informed by means of the media and public meetings
- Closely monitor and respond as necessary to any initiatives from local and central government
- Continue to work closely with RBMC in reducing any effect on Greenbelt usage
- Work with appropriate bodies in facilitating outcomes that satisfy the needs of the local community.

Expectations of the Action Group

From agreements made by, and meetings with RMBC, the Group expects the next consultation process will more closely reflect the wishes of the community by:

Being much more transparent and better publicised than previous ones

Showing that a much greater degree of Brownfield land will be utilised than the original proposals suggested

Demonstrating the total lack of need to use any high quality agricultural land.

Conclusion

Although the Group, in reflecting the wishes of the bulk of the local community, has made considerable progress in potentially reducing the use of Greenbelt for housing, it cannot rest on its laurels. Given agreements made with RMBC the expectations of the next consultation document are clear, maximum use of Brownfield sites at the expense of not building on the Greenbelt and the absence of any provision to use high quality agricultural land. The fight against using Greenbelt for development clearly goes on. The new kid on the block is 'Reducing The Need For More Homes' which may well involve dynamics with other local councils, Westminster, landowners and developers. Will the need arise for RMBC and the Save Our Greenbelt Dinnington & Anston Action Group to become allies?

<http://www.saveourgreenbelt.info/>

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