

# FeCRA – The Federation of Cambridge Residents' Associations



## **FeCRA2 019/2020 Annual General Meeting**

**Held on 16<sup>th</sup> July 2020 by Zoom starting at 7 pm**

*In the light of Covid 19 restrictions the meeting was deferred to July, but it remained necessary to hold the meeting by Zoom. It was intended to hold a larger event when circumstances allow.*

### **Attendance**

There were 31 participants, including representatives from many City Residents' Associations and community groups. Noteworthy among the participants was Allan Brigham of the Mill Road Society, who sadly passed away in September 2020.

The Chair, Wendy Blythe, introduced the current committee who were all present.

**Apologies for absence** 20 apologies were received.

### **1. Minutes of the previous AGM**

The minutes of the previous AGM held on 5<sup>th</sup> April 2019 were approved nem con

### **2. Election of Officers**

The Chair, thanked the present Committee, who had agreed to stand for another year and welcomed David Stoughton to the Committee. The Chair encouraged the participation of others who wished to be more involved in FeCRA. The officers were elected nem con:-

Wendy Blythe as Chair, Jean Glasberg as Vice Chair and John Latham as Treasurer.

### **3. Accounts**

The Treasurer presented the accounts to 29<sup>th</sup> February 2020. A surplus of £351 had been recorded, and a bank balance of £858 carried forward, but FeCRA remained entirely reliant

on the generosity of individuals and Residents' Associations. Those attending were invited to make donations via the website.

The Accounts were approved nem con.

#### **4. Chair's Report**

The Chair delivered her report, a copy of which is available on the website.

The challenges to the quality of life in Cambridge and highlighted the impacts of Covid 19 and the Climate Crisis were highlighted with the role that members of FeCRA had played in providing support through the pandemic.

The Chair drew attention to questions and concerns raised by RA representatives at briefings on the new Local Plan. Allan Brigham had said:

'All of England can't move to Cambridge. What Cambridge needs is affordable homes and jobs for our children'.

Public realm, social inclusion and environmental issues had been key issues for RAs and community groups. The Chair pointed to the threats to green spaces and city garden wildlife corridors that come from plans for urban densification, green belt transport corridors and high growth scenarios.

The growth of Friends' groups stimulated by these threats was remarkable.

An example was the work of the Friends of Queens' Green supporting biodiversity and this and similar efforts by groups working on management plans with the City Council Open Space officer to achieve more sympathetic management were outstanding. Such green spaces were admired across the world, and had been vital during the pandemic.

Among others, the efforts being made by other groups focusing on Skaters' Meadow, Lammis Land, St Alban's Rec, and St Matthew's Piece were laudable.

The qualities of life and environment that make Cambridge special do not scale, and are vulnerable to schemes such as transport plans to cut bus journeys by minutes.

There was a lack of engagement with environmental capacity issues, and reliance on urban fringe parks in the green belt to balance high growth proposals.

The River Cam's weak flow and the impact of over-abstraction of water had received increasing focus and widespread public attention. There was, however, no evidence that such concerns were limiting the willingness to approve large development. Indeed, work on the new Local Plan was focused on housing growth.

The massive North East Cambridge development proposals appeared not to be co-ordinated with other developments.

There had been national attention on the shortcomings of Cambridge's expansion, and there was widespread concern that inequalities were not being addressed and design and environmental standards were weak in new developments.

Whilst meetings and marches had been well attended, including by concerned residents, time was short.

The lack of an option in the new Local Plan to limit growth had been highlighted and the clear concern was why civic leaders were failing to question the assumption of growth and represent the view of their constituents.

Residents' desire is that Cambridge should be a sustainable, green and inclusive city. The key to this was full and timely community participation in the development of plans.

The Chair handed over to the Vice Chair, Jean Glasberg, who introduced the speakers who would take up themes in the Chair's report which were key issues for residents.

Valerie Neal would speak about proposals to build student accommodation above St Matthew's Piece. Sonia Spinks would discuss the City's proposals with Hill to build in Arbury on the St Alban's Recreation Ground. Stephen Tomkins the Chair of Cam Valley Forum would discuss water related issues. Three speakers, David Plank of Trumpington RA/Cambridge Commons, Tony Booth of Newtown RA and David Stoughton of Great Northern RA would then speak about growth.

## **5. Threats to City Green Spaces**

Valerie Neal (Friends of St Matthew's Piece) made a presentation describing the history of St Matthew's Piece and stressed its heritage as a dedicated public open space for 120 years given to the people of Petersfield "for the recreation of the inhabitants for ever". Valerie also traced the history of the Howard Mallett Centre, and the changes in responsibility from the City Council, with the County Council having chosen to dispose of the centre, followed by a series of failed initiatives. The changes in ownership of the associated land had produced sequential and disparate transactions among financially focused participants at perplexing figures, and had moved the focus a long way from the protected open space of 2006, with associated recreation and leisure.

Of immediate concern was the proposal to construct a massive student accommodation block on stilts, proposed to be some 20 metres tall, which if approved would involve cutting

down trees and would generate a great deal of activity and noise in a unique and valuable green and recreational space, of which Petersfield has very little. A planning application was expected imminently, and Valerie encouraged participants at the AGM to become involved with the campaign supporting the Friends of St Matthew's Piece.

Sonia Spinks (Friends of St Albans Rec) presented the proposals by the City Council and its partner Hill to build on St Alban's Recreation ground, an area much used and valued by residents of Arbury and Orchard Park. This would involve demolition of the existing Meadows Community Centre, replacing it with flats, including a six storey block. Trees would be cut down, and the recreation areas reduced. Although the Council had reduced the 'land take' the proposals still involve 78 dwellings.

Unfortunately, despite this being an important green space for local residents, and with Darwin Green being built, likely to be increasingly in demand, local Councillors were supporting the proposals and were not showing any support for residents' concerns.

## **6. Water issues**

Stephen Tomkins (Cam Valley Forum) reflected on the drying up of River Cam tributaries in the past year, including the Granta in 2019, and drew attention to CVF's 'Let it Flow' document on their website in which the contributory factors are described and solutions proposed. Stephen commented on long term rainfall, and the possible change in rainfall patterns which may be influenced by global warming, but was emphatic that the sourcing of Cambridge Water predominantly from the chalk was the most pressing issue. Water consumption was rising, but the consumers were not valuing their water supply as a precious resource. The winter recharge of the aquifer had not been effective, partly due to the soil moisture deficit. Only 40% of years appear to give the necessary recharge, but under their existing licences Cambridge Water have further headroom.

Stephen warned 'Cheat the earth and the earth will cheat you'. He encouraged participants to raise concerns with politicians. He referred to the meeting with Chris Smith, Master of Pembroke, and praised Anthony Browne MP's focus on water and the environment.

The Chair reaffirmed the importance of the River over the centuries to Cambridge and its residents, and asked how best CVF's work could be supported. Stephen suggested joining community groups and taking time to enjoy the riverine scene, for example by the Rush, but he wished above all that right Councillors with proper focus of the river should be elected.

## **7. Growth Agenda**

David Plank cast doubt on the merits of the growth agenda. High prices and rents drove poorer residents away and contributed to high levels of pollution. Natural resources were under strain, but these negatives outweigh the benefits to the wealthy of Cambridge's buoyant economy which was heavily reliant on digital activities and life sciences. The government's devolution deal had committed us and the Mayor to high growth, supported by Cambridge Ahead, a commercial lobby group.

Densification and the destruction of the Green Belt, and strain on health, education and social infrastructure meant that the quality of life of the many was being sacrificed for the wealth of the few, and exclusion was becoming worse.

There was an opportunity through the new local plan to bring about a change for the better, but political will was required to do so. There was a need to counterbalance the view that growth is inevitable, promoted by national planning policy. Sustainable development was required. The early indications were that the new local plan would be aiming for 40,000 to 66,700 new homes up to 2040. This is not acceptable and must be changed, as outlined in 'Growth Beyond Reason'. We should be aiming to regain some control of the process to secure a better balance of jobs and housing and affordable public transport, and generate a sense of place for the future.

Tony Booth said that growth was hurtling forward generating damage to the environment willy nilly the views of residents. The destructive results were well described in the book 'Hideous Cambridge'. Councillors were fearful of the officers and failed to speak their mind. One might wonder whether the Councillors can be taken seriously since they are all tied to the City Deal and GCP. The removal of the County Council to a business park in Alconbury exemplified the privatisation of public land.

The University had been drawn into this, for example with the Cambourne – Cambridge Guided Busway, with academic integrity compromised, and greenwash was being used to lend legitimacy to rampant growth. Developers were making a big deal of small investments in green assets leveraging their connections and offers of funding.

The outlook was not good, but with determination and shared purpose in environmental activism we should unite to continue the struggle.

David Stoughton questioned the assumption that new developments would bring jobs and wellbeing. The 'trickle-down' theory had been discredited but was still being peddled. The growth lobby had a strategy to divide and conquer and were infiltrating and suborning groups with an environmental focus. Natural Cambridgeshire was an example.

It seemed probable that Covid 19 may have changed matters, with different working patterns. It seemed quite possible that some businesses would never resume the previous pattern of working. Examples given included One Station Square with 10 people using 1,000 square feet of office space, ARM who would only return to their offices in 2021 at the earliest, and Software AG who had voted not to return. In the light of this changing pattern, and recognising that some activities might still need offices, the question arose why so many offices were still being built?

Recent changes in working patterns also begged the question of whether people would still wish to live in the area where their work was centred. The assumptions behind current plans may well not longer be valid.

The experience of the Covid pandemic had emphasised the importance of green spaces, and highlighted the lack of focus on wellbeing and quality of life. There was no alternative plan being offered for consideration, only fake alternatives and fake choices. Where could 40,000 or more new homes go?

A proper vision, and an alternative vision needed to be fleshed out and presented to the wider population. FeCRA could not be the sole owner of an alternative vision, but an effort was now required to create one and put it on the table.

The Vice Chair thanked the speakers for making it a most interesting evening, and looked forward to wider engagement around the issues that had been discussed. 'We can't let the juggernaut win'.

The meeting closed at 8.15 pm.

JAL

8.3.21