ANNUAL REPORT ON LOCAL DEMOCRACY AND QUALITY OF LIFE WORKING GROUPS 2023/24

LOCAL DEMOCRACY

During the past year this Working Group has produced a response on behalf of the Canterbury Society to the Corporate Plan published and put out to public consultation by the administration formed after the council elections .The response welcomed the fact that the new Council adopted the United Nations’Sustainable Development Goals as the framework for the Corporate Plan, which is designed to state what principles will govern the actions of the Council, and what its priorities will be. The Society’s response then went on to give its view on what action then should ensue to reach Net Zero carbon emissions ,especially in the area of transport, to improve management of green spaces and to increase biodiversity, to reduce poverty,and to establish a housing policy that met the actual needs of local people.At the same time the absence of any reference to preservation and enhancement of the historic built environment of the City was pointed out, and strong regret at this omission was expressed

The Working Group had worked up a response to the latest version of the Local Plan for which the previous administration had been responsible. With the change of administration it was not until spring 2024 that the new draft Local Plan was put out to public consultation.The Working Group produced a draft response to this version, for agreement by the committee. It expressed satisfaction that the idea of an Eastern By-pass had been taken out of the Plan. However, the number of houses to be built had only been reduced from 1252 to 1149 per year , and whereas major sites between Canterbury and Littlebourne had been cut out, a major site to the north of Canterbury between Blean and Tyler Hill had been added. The Society’s response concentrated on the new provision in the National Planning Policy Framework , which stated that planning authorities could refer to ‘exceptional circumstances’ to make the case for a reduced number of houses in their Local Plans; and argued that legitimate exceptional circumstances existed in the case of Canterbury, with its unique historic setting, the fact that in recent years the mis-match between average local incomes and the average price of new houses had led to a serious under-building of the number given planning permission , and the growing congestion on its central road network .(NB the new Government, formed after the General Election, has put out for public consultation , a revised National Planning Policy Framework, which explicitly removes the possibility of pleading ‘exceptional circumstances’ )

QUALITY OF LIFE

Over the year there have been five meetings of the Action on Poverty Partnership ,comprising representatives of voluntary and community organisations, the City Council, KCC, and the universities. In February 2024 the Partnership agreed to pursue a programme that would enable representatives to share experience and problems, but also to initiate projects to reduce poverty in the district. The Canterbury United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Forum, which had initiated the preparation of the Report on Poverty in Canterbury, handed over the management of the Partnership to the Canterbury Society, and to the leadership of Jan Pahl and Martin Vye.

Jan Pahl has led on a project aiming at increasing the take-up of state benefits by those who are eligible. There have been several meetings of the Unclaimed Benefits Project Working Group, resulting in the printing of several thousand leaflets aiming at encouraging those eligible to claim Pension Credit and reduction in Council Tax. The cost of these has been covered by councillor contributions from their public funds. In the summer of 2024 there has been a major effort to distribute the leaflets, at the Whitstable and Herne Bay Carnivals, and via voluntary and community organisations.

Martin Vye, with the help of others , has been ‘mapping’ sources of free/low-cost food in the district . He has identified 17 such sources , and made contact with them. They have been invited to a meeting on the 27th of September, to share experiences and problems, and to discuss whether there is mileage in co-working between them

Mehri Holliday has reported to the committee of the Canterbury Society on the work of the Quality of Life Working Group, and also on a symposium on food insecurity hosted by the University of Kent in April. .

A third project has been progressed successfully by the Partnership, namely one to ensure that new social tenants receive sufficient furniture on entering their new home. This has been led by Cllr Pip Hazelton, the City Council’s Cabinet Member for Housing..

MV