



Input to Neighbourhood Plan - Churches Together in Saffron Walden

Community / Social Needs

As churches we are concerned with the wellbeing of our town community, and of each individual in it. We may express this as our quality of life, but in doing so, we do not mean necessarily greater wealth and luxury, but wellness, of body, mind and spirit. In this regard, there must be a particular compassionate concern for the more vulnerable members of our community, the poor, the isolated and lonely, the sick and oppressed, those who mourn, those for whom life seems a constant struggle.

Whilst there has been a great focus on reaching the targets for new housing, we must not forget meeting the wider needs of the residents of the town and surrounding villages. To live in Saffron Walden means more than provision of housing. It must also mean provision of, and access to, the other things essential for a good life: Companionship, health and care, mental health and wellbeing, employment, education, youth services, social services, unemployment assistance, shops, churches, community and leisure facilities, policing. Indeed, unless provision is increased, we will have an increasing population, but a decreasing quality of life, and the vulnerable will become increasingly isolated and marginalised. Many of these facilities have actually decreased in recent months and years, at the same time as the town and surrounding are rapidly expanding.

Saffron Walden is a centre of provision not just for residents of the town but also for the surrounding villages. As the population of the area increases, the whole spectrum of provision needs to increase in step with this, and such provision cannot be separated from the supporting infrastructure of the town. This will be difficult and costly, but it is unrealistic to think that a town, already under strain, can cope unless these provisions are made. Below, is a small sample of some of the issues:

- Whilst fear of being unsafe is undoubtedly worse than the facts actually justify, the fear may well still discourage people from venturing out. The drastic reduction in policing of the town does not help.
- The provision of GP surgeries needs to be increased, whereas we have seen a reduction recently. Where will they go to hospital? Both our local main hospitals are already stretched.
- Expansion of school places is needed, it is not helpful when children have to travel greater distances to schools
- There is limited local employment available so many will end up driving to work or the station, to access employment.
- We feel the town is well provided for in terms of varied styles of worship and faith communities and the churches work well together

Social Housing

As more and more houses are being built we are concerned that this should include extensive provision of social housing. In our rush to build, we must consider the poor and more vulnerable members of our society. Policies and targets for good quality social housing need to be in place, and they need to be enforced and protected. It cannot just be about provision for, and maximising the wealth of the few. We have a responsibility to also provide for the less fortunate.

Access

It is no good providing facilities unless there is also the means to efficiently travel to them. The town's traffic problems work against this, and the resultant pollution and safety issues are impacting on our wellbeing and quality of life in the town. Our perception is that the traffic problems in the town are already seriously impacting on the lives of its residents, on access to services, and to increasing isolation. This is no doubt most true of those who have to rely upon public transport, and these will often be the most vulnerable in our community, the poor, sick and those living on their own. Some residents already feel isolated and lonely, shut in and are unwilling or unable to venture out too often in order to access increasingly distant provision.

There is little space for housing in the centre of town, so housing will primarily be on the widening circumference. Along with the growing traffic problem, comes the need for more parking. On-street parking is reducing as parking restrictions are introduced to help the flow of increasing traffic volumes. Accessing the existing parking often means driving through the town centre, further exacerbating the traffic problems. How will the narrow streets of a historic market town cope with the projected growth?

It seems, that these growing transport and traffic problems, are treated as just something, we must endure, that there is nothing that can be done. We feel, this cannot and must not be the case, it must be addressed as a matter of urgency, not just be ignored as the problem grows along with the population.

Possible solutions

Something can of course be done, if we are willing to make provision. It is not impossible, it is just difficult and costly. What could be done to help address this and improve the lives of residents?

- Greatly improved public transport (buses) reversing the recent trend where this has been reduced.
- A new car park south of the town to keep traffic away from the town centre
- Will the growth in the area require further expansion of the Audley End station car park?
- A new ring road around the town (not existing residential streets) keeping traffic out of the town centre
- Satellite community facilities could be provided around this ring road thereby reducing journey times to them, and reducing traffic volumes in the town centre. The town centre itself remaining the key hub for central facilities
- A new motorway junction
- Expanded provision of schools, GP surgeries, hospital capacity, mental health care.
- Reinstatement of town policing.
- Increased provision of social care, youth services, education, community and leisure facilities.

None of these are easy or cheap. But expanding a historic market town is not going to be easy, and to avoid decline of the quality of life in the area, expansion of provision and improved access is essential, it is not an optional extra. Development needs to be limited by the capacity of the area and its infrastructure and by the provision of facilities, rather than allowing extensive unsustainable development simply to reach housing targets.

It may be felt that such extensive development of facilities and infrastructure is unrealistic, but we feel it is unrealistic to continue with further housing development without it.