

## Statement from SOHL on the upcoming Heathlands Public Consultation

Last night's P&R Committee debated the seemingly controversial issue of where to hold the upcoming public consultation for the council's Heathlands 'new town' development proposal east of Lenham.

The confirmation last night that the public consultation event is now to be held at the Great Danes hotel in Hollingbourne continues to be an **unacceptable** proposition to SOHL and Lenham's residents. Prior to this, MBC wanted to hold the event even further away at the Maidstone Innovation Centre in Weaving citing cost reasons. Cllr Janetta Sams explained at last night's meeting that holding the event outside of the Lenham and Harrietsham ward is not good enough and we were pleased some members of P&R Committee including Cllrs Munford, English and Harper expressed their dissatisfaction too before moving an amendment to the recommendations to ensure the event is held closer to Lenham.

Lenham has a perfectly reasonable Community Centre at the heart of the village. This venue is big enough, fully accessible, and most importantly available for the purposes of holding a public consultation event. It is the community hub of the village, well known and used extensively by villagers. To use an alternative venue 6-10 miles away at much greater expense than the very modest hire charge for the Lenham Community Centre is unfathomable.

The Heathlands proposition has experienced abject failure in how it has engaged with the local community to date. From the very outset when Lenham Parish Council first learned about the scheme on the front page of the Kent Messenger, to the complete information vacuum that has prevailed over the subsequent 2-3 years, local opinion has routinely been ignored. It has been led by senior officers who have tried their utmost to avoid engaging with the very community this proposal seeks to destroy. Even landowners who found their land within the successive masterplans didn't receive the simplest courtesy of being informed by MBC that they had been included.

We knew the time would eventually come when **MBC had to consult** with the

local community. That time has finally arrived and it is deeply disappointing that further attempts are being made to subvert the engagement process.

**MBC has hired at great expense an external PR company to manage the public consultation process. It is only right that this consultation is open, transparent and accessible for all to have their say.**

Officers claimed at P&R last night that the security of their staff was the reason for choosing a hotel venue away from Lenham. Inferences were made by Members that they had been subjected to verbal and physical abuse from residents at Full Council in October and at previous events. **It is important for us to put on record that at no time have any members of the SOHL action group acted in an aggressive or threatening way to Members or officers.** SOHL will also play its part in reinforcing a non-threatening response to the consultation with our residents.

However, it is equally important that local democracy in Maidstone allows for residents to fully have their say and that opportunity should be **in Lenham**, the community itself.

We hope common sense will prevail on this matter.