

Council Officers Misled Planning Committee

A lively meeting of the Sowerby Bridge Community Forum on Thursday evening 28th July at St Paul's Church led to the startling revelation that Council Planning Officers knowingly misled Planning Committee members when it met to determine GenR8's plans for the Copley valley.

Council officers told Planning Committee members that the SBCF had given its written support to the GenR8 scheme. In response to questions from Diane Wade of the Copley Valley Environmental Group however SBCF Chair Molly Bake confirmed that the 'letter of support' reported by Council officers was no more than a copy of personal letter of support actually sent by her to the Halifax Evening Courier. She had been asked by an unidentified council officer to send the copy to him, which she had done. Mrs Bake also confirmed that whilst members of the SBCF had indeed considered GenR8's proposals they had in fact never formally voted to support them.

And it gets worse...

There were some 800 objections to GenR8's planning application. Officers reported receipt of just three letters of public support. One was the incorrectly reported 'letter of support from SBCF'. One was from an officer within the Council's own regeneration department and another from a planning officer from a neighbouring Local Authority. Neither lives in the Sowerby Bridge or the Copley valley. Neither declared their 'interest'.

Sowerby Bridge Community Forum

For nearly two years Sowerby Bridge resident Steve Ainsworth has been trying to encourage the members of the SBCF to adopt a new constitution and become a genuine community forum - and to actually be 'what it says on the tin'.

Steve writes:

Sowerby Bridge deserves to have a good community forum, and my aim is to strengthen the current body, to empower it to do its job properly, and give it some real legitimacy.

At present it suffers from several very serious problems.

A community forum must by definition be open to everyone, must be accountable to the community for its actions, and must genuinely reflect the views of the community it purports to represent.

Since its creation in 2004 however the SBCF has been in effect run as if it were a secret society. Meetings have not been advertised, and minutes generally not made available to the public.

An Executive Committee meets but does not produce minutes for later ratification of its decisions by the whole Forum, leaving even its own members in ignorance of what may have been decided in their name.

Meanwhile, though several of its members are not from Sowerby Bridge, anyone who does live in the Sowerby Bridge area but who does not agree with its officers is excluded from membership.

The root of the problem is that SBCF was not set up as a genuine 'community forum', but rather it was established in 2004 essentially as a support group for Council development officers.

Sowerby Bridge needs a strong, genuinely representative, open and publicly accountable community forum. It does not yet have one, but I very much hope that with a little more encouragement current members will appreciate that the present organisation is unsustainable, and that a revitalised community forum can be established which will live up to its name.

In particular, because of its historic origins, SBCF has had an unhealthy and inappropriately-close relationship with Council 'regeneration' officers - leaving its officers open to accusations of representing developers rather than representing the community.

As a direct consequence of its flawed birth SBCF has to date failed in its natural responsibility to actively fight for the people of Sowerby Bridge against the depredations of property developers in the Copley valley and against the increased traffic congestion and air pollution in the town which are predicted to follow such development.

I would urge everyone who lives in the Sowerby Bridge area and who has the best interests of the town at heart, to take an active interest in all local affairs, and to attend meetings of the Community Forum, and help facilitate and encourage its reformation and rehabilitation.

The next meeting of the Sowerby Bridge Community Forum is scheduled to take place at 6.30 pm on Thurs 8th September at St Paul's Church, Tower Hill.