

COUNCIL MEETING 15TH FEBRUARY 2011

STATEMENT FROM CLLR ELEANOR JACKSON ABOUT PLANNING ENFORCEMENT IN RADSTOCK WARD

I wonder how many councillors here first learnt their debating skills justifying or refuting the motion that 'The ends justify the means.' Famously exploited by Reichkanzler Otto von Bismarck, when he launched wars against Austria and France in order to bring the German states together into one nation, it has a long ancestry back through Metternich and Machiavelli and beyond. However, at this time of night even I have not got the energy to give a lecture on political ethics, even if you wanted to hear it. The point is that we may have agreed tonight that cuts are necessary, that we have to balance the budget and that we have to do it within a narrow time frame. But if you prune a diseased tree too hard, you kill it off altogether. To demonstrate what I mean, let us consider the situation after the 2010 cuts. The result is to leave the core staffing of B&NES dangerously weak and exposed because there are some services which even the most enthusiastic volunteers cannot provide. This particularly applies to planning and enforcement, where staff have been reduced to the point where they cannot deliver decisions to deadlines, and the enforcement team is more or less reduced, metaphorically speaking, to three trained staff and a dog. The frequent turn over of staff does not help, nor the amount of stress -related illnesses cuts cause to the over-worked survivors.

Perhaps Radstock is singularly afflicted with rogue developers and scrap metal merchants. Perhaps we are unique in having cases which have dragged out for decades despite planning inspectors' rulings that the land be restored to what it was, but I doubt if that is so. Many of us are aware of the uproar about Woolley Valley and Fuller's Earth. But hopefully it is only in so-called 'bandit country' that officers and councillors are threatened with violence when an enforcement decision is upheld.

In my ward there are a number of long-running disputes which are like infected sores. Radstock people do not have the means to take legal action to defend their property or their amenities, or in one case the whole natural environment of a settlement which has its roots in Roman times. It makes me wonder how much it is appreciated that if the law is undermined in a few notorious cases, the law as a whole is brought into disrepute. And here I would urge that no council contracts are given to companies which break planning law or environmental health regulations. Economic sanctions may work where inspectors' rulings are ignored. But the bottom line is that more properly qualified staff are needed, especially with the 25% increase in planning applications in recent months. Compared with the privatisation of the NHS, the increased costs of homecare, the loss of EMA and the tripling of university fees, planning and enforcement may seem small beer, but for of us on the ground, planning problems cause more agitation than anything else. If localism means anything –or 'the big society'- then the council should listen to local community groups and act. URGENTLY!