

## **Matters and Issues 11**

### **Druitt Hall : to discuss concerns raised by local residents**

Druitt Hall was built in 1953 as the Christchurch memorial to the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, on land given to the people of Christchurch by the late Charlotte Druitt. It was paid for by public subscription and intended as an 'Old Peoples' Club and Welfare Centre', and meeting place available to hire at low rates. A pioneer of the multi-use community hall concept, it brought together many voluntary organisations, and over its 60 years the Hall has seen countless and varied community activities.

The Hall was threatened with closure and demolition but a campaign to save it resulted in a stay of execution. The Friends of Druitt Hall organised petitions to reject the Council's plans for demolition and a total of 2020 signatures were recorded. The Council were not deterred by this community response and declared that the Hall would be demolished in March 2013.

**For the past 10 years there have been statements supporting a Community Hall in policy documents produced by the Council and there were over 30 objections when the statement "the provision of a new community facility in Christchurch town centre will be supported" was proposed for removal from the Core Strategy Vision. Public support for this valued community facility had been unwavering for many years and the council's action went contrary to public opinion and the wishes of residents. No justification was offered.**

A representative of the community group met with the Chief Executive to explain local feeling. It was clear that the council did not intend to refurbish the Hall or to fund a new Hall and paid no heed to resident's protests. No justification for this policy about-turn in the Core Strategy was forthcoming. A belated statement that the change had been necessary to make it clear that the council could not fund a replacement hall was ridiculed by residents as the council had previously tasked the Christchurch Community Partnership with raising money for a new hall. This had not attracted the required funding but it had been clear for years that the hall would have to be funded from external sources.

The council's planning application to demolish the hall generated over 200 letters of objection and a petition of over 1000 signatures opposing the demolition. The planning application was refused in January 2013 and it seemed that resident's opposition was finally being acknowledged. But the council put out a statement that the hall would close as planned.

It is clear that the council have ridden roughshod over the objections raised by residents and that they have failed to provide credible explanations for their actions.

### **Tests of Soundness**

I submit that the deletion of the wording to support a new community facility in the town centre is unsound on the grounds of not being positively prepared, not being justified and not being consistent with national policy.

#### **Positively Prepared**

There are numerous references in the Core Strategy to the need to respond to the existing demographic in Christchurch with community facilities in the centre for elderly residents. Deleting this sentence will be at odds with many other policies.

Justified

There are no other large meeting halls in the centre of Christchurch which are non-denominational, affordable and accessible from bus stops. The need for this community hall is irrefutable, the residents have made their feelings known and the aspiration for a central community facility should therefore remain in the Vision.

Consistent with National Policy

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) does not support the deletion of **“the provision of a new community facility in Christchurch town centre will be supported”**. It begins by acknowledging that ‘in recent years planning has tended to exclude, rather than include, people and communities.’

1. Para 7 states that there is a need to support *“strong, vibrant and healthy communities...with accessible local services that reflect the community’s needs and support its health, social and cultural well-being”*.
2. Para 23 states that we should *“allocate a range of suitable sites to meet the scale and type of retail, leisure...cultural, community and residential development needed in town centres”*
3. Para 69, on promoting healthy communities, states that *“ The planning system can play an important role in facilitating social interaction and creating healthy, inclusive communities”*
4. Para 70 lists ways *“to deliver the social, recreational and cultural facilities and services the community needs, planning policies and decisions should...”*

These four examples from NPPF are extremely relevant to Christchurch town centre and by clear implication would support the retention of the statement **“the provision of a new community facility in Christchurch town centre will be supported”**

### **Conclusion**

There was no consultation or explanation for this proposed major change in council policy, indeed it was tucked away in a large and complex document. There was no proposal put to a council meeting or committee and it is therefore hard to conclude other than it was intended to escape scrutiny. Once residents became aware of this significant change, no rational explanation was forthcoming. When residents made their views known the council refused to consider their concerns. This casts doubt on the legitimacy of a ‘Consultation’ which ignores the duly-made responses of the residents. The people of Christchurch deserve better.

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***Transition Town Christchurch is part of a global movement to move from a fossil fuel dependent way of life to a more sustainable one. A key strategy is building resilient communities. Transition Town Christchurch makes this representation in support of this aim.***