

Kirklees planning system is in disarray

Anyone living in Skelmanthorpe will have witnessed the growth in new developments over the past few years. Doubtless many will have commented on how unsuitable the designs or the materials seem to be for the area where they are being built. The Jones Homes buildings on Station Road are a case in point, where the three story blocks dominate the area, sticking out like sore thumbs. The Bovis homes built on the old allotments site are another example.

Most of us simply can't understand how the council planning department can pass the plans for such obviously unsuitable developments. SCAG members who have been fighting developer's plans for the past two years have discovered at least some of the answers:

- The first is that the system is heavily biased in favour of the developer. If the developer's plans are turned down they can appeal repeatedly until they get their plans approved.
- The governments housing targets mean that local authorities are under great pressure to build houses, so there is an underlying bias towards granting permission, at least where the big construction companies are concerned.
- If the plans go to the planning committee for approval, then the majority of the members represent other areas, most won't know anything about Skelmanthorpe. So they have no idea, when they are considering plans, if the design fits in with the local surroundings or how the new development might impact on existing properties and people. Under these circumstances the impact of the new development on the local landscape can't really be considered at all.
- When local people attend these meetings to object they find their time is restricted to just a few minutes, making it very difficult to put across complex arguments about why the development shouldn't be passed.
- Where plans are passed with conditions about traffic calming, landscaping or the creation of green spaces, the building companies routinely ignore the conditions. In many cases they are never held to account by the planning department and these conditions are never met. The Bovis Homes and Jones Homes developments are both examples where the original planning conditions have never been fully met. Incidentally we have discovered that many of the large developers fail to pay the fees they owe the council, and these fees are rarely chased up or collected.
- Finally, we have discovered there appears to be no consistency between the decisions made by different planning officers. So while one might turn down a particular development, another might approve the same plans.

This particular problem is well illustrated by a recent case in Skelmanthorpe where plans to build in a conservation area were rejected at the original application. But, when the same plans were re submitted later, to a different officer, they were passed. This

happened despite the fact that the proposed development didn't fit in with the existing properties in the conservation area. We might ask what's the point of having a conservation area if just any sort of building can be erected?

SCAG and our local councillors have taken up the case and are fighting hard to get this decision overturned. Of course the odds are stacked against us now permission has been granted. The real issue is that planning officers should make consistent judgements and should apply the rules stringently where conservation areas are involved.

Surely the time has come in the twenty first century when it should be possible for developers to design attractive buildings using materials that match in with the local environment. New homes should enhance the area rather than becoming a blot on the landscape, we all have to live with for a lifetime.