

News from Stratford District Council

This month, District Councillor **Trevor Russel** provides an update on the Vision for Stour, reports that SDC is identifying possible sites for housebuilding, speculates on the future of the Area Office, and reveals the results of a new residents' survey.

Working on the Vision

Many of you took part in the consultation last year on The Vision for Stour – a District Council initiative to identify the community's priorities (in Shipston and the villages around) for the next 15 years in terms of housing, employment, shops, leisure, open spaces and so on.

What's happened to it?

The Council adopted the Vision late last year. Work has been going on to develop an action plan to deliver it – break it down into doable chunks, set timescales and targets, identify resources and assign who is going to deliver what. Otherwise, it will have been a meaningless exercise.

It's not a straightforward job. SDC itself can't deliver the whole Vision: the county and town councils, health authorities and, crucially, community groups all have to commit and contribute resources. Without everyone's buy-in, the action plan will crash soon after take-off.

We also have to dovetail the Vision with the new Town Plan for Shipston that is being put together, and with the Local Development Framework that I mentioned last month.

I expect the action plan to be finalised by December latest (and you will be consulted on it). That's when the District Council is considering next year's budget, with councillors in this area arguing for funding for the Vision. By then too, we will have approved a new Corporate Strategy to run from 2008 to 2011. I expect delivering the Vision to be included and to become a Council priority – and SDC will have to fund its priorities.

So watch this space. But be assured that the Vision is alive and well.

Anyone have any land for new housing?

Talking again of the Local Development Framework (LDF), the Council has asked a firm of consultants to conduct a survey of the District's main towns – including Shipston – to identify potential brownfield and greenfield sites where new homes could (I stress *could*) be built.

Anyone in Shipston with land big enough to accommodate ten or more dwellings can submit details of their sites.

That *doesn't* mean any of them will be allocated for housing development. The aim is to find out where new development can take place *if* the LDF decides Shipston needs to take more housing.

The man to contact at SDC is David Jones on 01789 260334.

Is it goodbye to our Area Office?

Hands up if you're aware that SDC has an Area Office in Shipston: not bad, 55 percent of you do. And hands up if you've ever visited it: oh dear, only eight per cent.

Now hands up if you want SDC to keep it open. Actually, that question hasn't been asked – yet. But it will be soon because councillors and officers are looking hard at the best way of making the Council accessible, balancing convenience to residents and the cost to ratepayers.

We have an Area Office in Shipston so that residents in the town, and the neighbouring area, don't have to trudge to Stratford. And I'm sure the users value it greatly.

The question we are asking ourselves is: can we justify the cost of keeping the office when so very few people use it – and when the numbers calling in are likely to fall even further?

And the numbers *will* continue to fall. Most people already prefer to contact SDC by 'phone. Increasingly, they are doing so by e-mail. All the Council's services are accessible electronically. You can pay your bills, make a housing enquiry or apply to go on the housing waiting list, look at planning applications or submit one, get tons of other information through your computer 24/7.

There is a very strong case for closing the office. And I can disclose that this was proposed last year. But I strongly resisted it because to me SDC mustn't become a faceless organisation accessible only by a contact centre or a computer. We must retain the human touch.

The Council is now experimenting with a mobile service shared with the county council, where officers visit villages on set days to deal with issues residents want to discuss face-to-face. It's proving a success, would be cheaper to run than keeping the Area Office open five days a week – and could prove an alternative.

The future of our Area Office will be raised again, with the argument that 'if people don't use it, they can't complain if they lose it.' Will you complain?

Your top five concerns

Another question for you: what do residents in the Stour Area – Shipston and the villages around – feel needs improving the most?

The top five issues identified in a new SDC consultation were: activities for teenagers (50 percent), affordable decent housing and public transport (36 percent), and traffic congestion and road and pavement repairs (33 percent).

Interestingly, on crime – which still features among the top five concerns in other parts of the District – Stour residents were the most likely to say that SDC is working hard to make things safer. As a result, we feel there are more important issues to tackle.

Of course, lack of activities for youngsters has long been a problem in Shipston. Hopefully, the new skate park – due to be built by the summer – and new drop-in facilities for youngsters in the town will ease residents' concerns.