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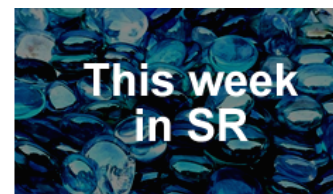
For the last 20-odd years, I have lived in a small village (419 souls) a few miles from St Andrews. The village is like many others in North East Fife: a tiny primary school, a couple of small businesses, pub closed some years back, active village hall, and no shop. And, like similar villages, it is surrounded by large estates which do their best to have an amicable relationship with the villagers. But this tranquil and peaceful status quo was shattered in May in a series of actions undertaken by a local landowner.

A planning application 'in principle' was lodged with Fife Council's planning department. Do not worry, this is not a piece about not-in-my-backyard complaints. It is about systemic failings of the relationship between unelected bureaucrats and elected councillors.

Planning rules are of Byzantine complexity and opacity, but a few facts should be sufficient to highlight how process compliance takes precedence over substantive analysis. As the proposed holiday resort is classed as 'a major development', there is no requirement for the applicant to contact local residents, as local consultation is undertaken though the relevant community council. What if the community has no community council (in the village in question, it was disbanded 10 years ago)?

Surely, logic, accountability and transparency, not to mention morality, should dictate that, as the purpose of the exercise is to canvas local opinion, residents in the directly affected village ought to be consulted via alternative means, say through a meeting in the village hall.

Instead, Fife Council's rules stipulated that the only other neighbouring community council ought to be consulted, even if it has no interest whatsoever in the matter and is not even required or expected to alert the affected village. Perhaps it is not wholly surprising that the 'consultation



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meeting' was attended by a handful people who had nothing better to do on the day. (Strangely, no mention of this not wholly irrelevant fact can be found in the planning documentation.)

Readers with long memories may recall the glorious *Songs of Praise* sketch where Rowan Atkinson as the angry vicar berates the full congregation on the day of recording compared to the usual turn-out ('Myself, the organist, and a tin of spaghetti').

It is instructive to track the history of this planning application for 'mixed holiday tourism development including tree house style holiday homes, lodge style holiday caravans, golf greens and bunkers, private grass airstrip, wedding venue and chapel, play barn, indoor swimming pools, store building and associated infrastructure'. Yes, it is not a typo: the 'private grass airstrip' is for the use of light aircrafts, presumably for wealthy visitors unwilling to use the fully equipped Dundee Airport – all of 12 miles away.

Planning permission has already been granted for a bistro, a 48-space carpark and a helipad. If you wonder what kind of bistro needs such a large carpark and a helipad, you are asking the wrong question, because this salami slicing of planning applications is a well-known ploy used by corporate developers, with the acquiescence of the planning department, where a 'non-major development' application is submitted to pave the way to a later much bigger development.

Another example of process overriding substance is the failure to join the dots. Even in the strange world of planning, any development that involved a 30% expansion of a single village would be examined in some detail, but not in Fife.

According to the applicant's own figures (assuming a 71% occupancy rate), the resort will have 44,895 'bed nights' (sleeping population) a year – a 30% increase compared to the whole village. Moreover, considering the seasonality of golf tourism, a much larger impact would be recorded in spring and summer. None of these figures appear on the documentation.

My final example of process over substance refers to what economists call 'opportunity cost'. Given that countryside land is a finite resource, granting (irreversible) permissions to unsuitable developments means that appropriate and sustainable developments are less likely to take place (the opportunity is lost). And round my village there are plenty of examples of responsible landowners who are providing job opportunities for local people by investing in environment-friendly operations, changing agricultural practices for greater sustainability, providing trading places for local producers and artisans, etc.

Perusing the 135 documents related to the relevant applications may give the impression of a thorough analysis, but a careful reading reveals some interesting facts. For example, the village and surrounding areas are blessed with a thriving wildlife including red squirrels, badgers, deer and a multitude of birds, 12 species of which are on the endangered list. One would have thought that helicopters and aircrafts whizzing around, not to mention the 1am licence for 'parties', could possibly have some kind of effect on the local wildlife, but not Fife Council's planning department for whom 'no Environmental Impact Assessment is required'.

Surely the traffic implications would be carefully scrutinised. Well, the 'traffic assessment' box is duly ticked and plenty of favourable evidence presented,



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but which planning department would take at face value and with a straight face findings based on a traffic survey undertaken in the first week of December (not exactly the peak of agricultural and tourist traffic)? What about the employment impact of the proposed development? In the case of the bistro-cum-helipad, again the 'business and employability' box is ticked and the 'statutory consultee' in the form of the council's business and employability department was duly consulted, but oddly, the relevant officer had 'no comment to make'.

But this piece is not about the surreal world of helipads and landing strips in the middle of the countryside. It is about the shockingly anti-democratic rules enforced by Fife Council's planning department.

Consider the basics of local democracy: why do we bother to elect local councillors? Surely to represent the views and interests of the electorate. This is why, for example, a local councillor came round to my village last week to canvas opinion about potholes, GP appointments, etc, but did not utter a single word about the proposed obscene helipad and landing strip resort and for a very good reason. In the topsy-turvy world of Fife planning, the very fact of listening to the local electorate about any matter concerning planning issues automatically disbars councillors from attending, let alone voting at, the meetings where planning applications are approved or rejected.

In the catch-22 universe of Fife planning, the mere canvassing of the opinion of electors is regarded as a conflict of interest, implying that the elected representatives of the people most directly affected by developments can only take 'unbiased' decisions by being kept in the dark about their own electorate's views on the matter.

I am sure that the councillors attending the next meeting of the planning committee on 28 June are men and women of principle who will spot a flawed development when they see one. But more importantly, they could take a few steps towards redressing the balance of power between unelected bureaucrats and elected representatives.

In addition to changing the definition of conflict of interests that prevents them from discharging their democratic mandate, they might wish to revise the rules about pantouflage (the evocative French practice of moving quickly on retirement from a public-sector position into a usually lucrative private-sector one) by stopping council planners from taking up jobs with developers and planning consultants, and to require planners to keep and release logs of any social meetings with corporate developers. A sub-committee or an ombudsman-type office could be set up where Fife residents can highlight any anomalies in the application and enforcement of planning regulations.

Something may be rotten in the Kingdom of Fife, but the light of transparency and accountability is the best disinfectant.

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