

**Address in support of petition to Lancaster City Council from Kellet & Halton
Wards - 23 September 2015**

Under the section headed "Improving the Rural Environment" in the Lancaster City Council Planning Handbook it says "In responding to pressures for new development the City Council will look to guard against inappropriate change and protect the character of villages". I speak on behalf of residents of villages in the Halton and Kellet Wards of Lancaster District who feel strongly that Lancaster City Council is failing in this commitment.

Our villages are rural in character and in some cases have been sustained as communities separate from the urban centre of Lancaster for over a thousand years. These villages have of course grown and developed over this time and we appreciate they must continue to do so. However any development must always be sympathetic to the intrinsic character of the village and be of a scale so as not to destroy for all time the unique identity of these special rural communities. In this regard when considering developments within the rural environment we expect the City Council to

- safeguard the sense of identity of village communities
- respect the visual amenity associated with the landscapes surrounding rural settlements
- conserve the quality and character of village landscapes and the setting of rural villages and
- recognise that landscape containing green spaces is an irreplaceable community asset

Sadly, in recent years we have observed symptoms of neglect of the rural voice locally, in that

- the executive of this Council does not include elected representatives from rural wards in the District, and there is no longer a Cabinet member with a portfolio for "Rural Affairs" and
- there is no adequate forum in which issues of major importance to rural communities, such as the preparation of the Local Plan, can be properly debated.

Of course we appreciate the City Council has full responsibility for many of the decisions affecting rural communities, but we believe it is vitally important that local rural opinion informs the decisions which have an impact on local village communities. Residents in our communities are caused immense unnecessary stress and upset when plans are produced for consultation without prior discussion with the communities that will be directly affected by them. Wouldn't it make so much more sense to involve the representatives of local communities from the outset so that when plans are formulated by the City Council, there is greater likelihood that they will have public support when published for formal consultation?

Present procedures mean that many of us in rural communities have little faith or trust in the way Lancaster City Council transacts its business. Rightly or wrongly, we see the Council as urban centred with little or no interest or understanding of the rural environment. We live in a democracy in which there should be no place for feelings of "them and us". We are all in this together - working for what is best for urban and rural communities alike, but what you - and we - must always remember is that we have an overriding responsibility to future generations as stewards of the rural environment. We are simply passing through it, and once it is gone it has gone forever. We are holding it on trust for future generations: do we really want to take responsibility for north Lancashire children in the future saying "Mummy, daddy, what's a village?"

We ask therefore that

- you promote city, coast and countryside - without sidelining the countryside
- you resolve to work with the Parish and Town Councils in the District and fully recognise their contributions in preserving the distinctiveness and aspirations of our local communities and
- you set up a working group with Council Officers and representatives of rural parishes and of the city council to enable rural views to inform the process of preparing component documents in the Local Plan.

Having obtained over 360 signatures on the petition in our two wards asking for these things to happen, we had hoped this would have triggered a council debate under section 10 of your constitution. We were disappointed to be told that because we had worded our petition in a way that applied to all Parish and Town Councils in the District, not just ours, we would require 1500 signatures for it to be debated. Although appreciating this is a legalistic way of viewing our petition I believe it is a view that lacks both logic and commonsense. Sadly, by potentially delaying any action to alleviate our concerns in this way, it actually illustrates the point the petition is making – namely that the Council is neglecting the concerns of our rural communities. Judging by the ease with which the initial 360 signatures were achieved, it would not have been a problem to gather another 1140 signatures to bring the total to 1500, but we are grateful to the Councillor for Kellet Ward and to his colleague from Carnforth who have submitted a notice of motion for debate today based on the petition - and have thereby avoided the delay that pursuit of extra signatures would otherwise have caused in bringing the matter to a debate.

Rural residents in the district will be watching the progress of today's debate and will be looking for your approval of the requests in the petition.

Nick Ward, Chairman Over Kellet Parish Council