

# **Report of the Good Society Zoom Meeting with Councillors – Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

## **Introduction**

This was the eighth meeting we have had since our start in 2015, asking “What makes a Good Society?” and “What can we do to bring it about?” After our meeting with two local MPs, William Wragg MP and Navendu Mishra MP in May, we invited local Councillors to join us. We were delighted that Cllr Tom McGee, Deputy Leader of Stockport Council and no fewer than eight Councillors representing Offerton, Stepping Hill and Manor wards participated actively in the meeting, along with around 40 other participants from a range of backgrounds. Thank you to all for taking part and for your interest in building a Good Society.

## **Format**

We changed the format of the meeting from the path we had trodden with the MPs. On this occasion, we asked anyone to send in a question for the Councillors in advance. These extended over seven pages, which we sent out to all the Councillors and everyone on our mailing list in advance (if you have not seen the questions already, please contact me for a copy). When we met together via Zoom, we had:

- Welcome and Introductions by Rev Cathy Bird, Superintendent Minister of the United Stockport Methodist Circuit, and Liz Delafield, Primary School Teacher and Local (lay) Preacher
- Presentations (5 minutes each) by representative Councillors, sharing their recent experiences and responding to the questions:
  - Cllr Tom McGee (Deputy Leader of the Council)
  - Cllr Will Dawson (Liberal Democrat, Offerton)
  - Cllr Charlie Stewart (Labour, Manor), and
  - Cllr John Wright (Conservative, Stepping Hill)
- We then moved into Break-out rooms where everyone had the chance to reflect on what they had heard and discuss their particular concerns
- We were grateful to Cllrs Grace Baynham, Mark Weldon, Amanda Peers, Laura Clingan and Wendy Meikle for also taking part in the whole event, including joining in the breakout rooms
- Anyone was welcome to add comments and questions to the Zoom “Chat” function at any time (we had nearly 200 entries)
- The four councillors were invited to speak again, reflecting on what they had heard
- Cathy and Liz thanked everyone and closed the meeting

## **What did we talk about?**

It is impossible to reproduce all the detail of the eight Councillor presentations, the multiple break-out rooms and the contributions via chat, which were being added throughout the Zoom session. I have just tried to capture a flavour here and apologise if I have missed important points – please add them to our Facebook Group: “A Good Society @Dialstonelane”

### **a) Housing**

We recognised – once again – the importance of providing adequate amounts of suitable, affordable housing for the people of Stockport. We heard of the difficulties of identifying land for development and persuading private developers to invest in the mix of housing that Stockport needs. It was suggested that developers are often reluctant to commit to developments on brownfield sites because of the necessary remediation costs. “If shops are having to shut, why not convert them into housing” mused two people.

In one breakout room, we explored the practical considerations when considering expanding onto green space – including the removal of amenity and access and egress issues, through a single road.

We were told about the challenges of living in high-rise accommodation, especially when services are sometimes not delivered – and coupled with lockdown restrictions which have hit residents hard.

Another participant reminded us of the importance of nurturing communities with appropriate facilities to go alongside housing. Well-established housing developments can sometimes lack such provision but provision for good health and connectivity between people is a priority.

### **b) Environment**

More than one person stressed the urgency of addressing environmental challenges.

Linking with the previous topic, we discussed the importance of building housing of a right standard – with appropriate insulation as a basic necessity. We also heard about the challenges of converting existing housing to suitable environmental quality – and encouraged the council to assist people who wanted to do this.

Experience during lockdown has shown the need for garden space or green space nearby and we need to find ways to make such spaces available and attractive to all.

We were encouraged to explore the Community Land Trust Movement: CLTs are set up and run by ordinary people to develop and manage homes as well as other assets important to

that community, like community enterprises, food growing or workspaces (<http://www.communitylandtrusts.org.uk/>).

### **c) Transport**

We recognised that transport and the environment are inextricably connected. Several participants stressed the value of walking, cycling and using public transport – and the importance of facilitating this for all.

We were reminded that we can find out Stockport's cycle paths via the Council's website.

### **d) Poverty and Inequality**

In all our deliberations, we recognised the importance of cohesive community, enabling all to thrive. Inequality is pernicious – as just one example, education support has not been uniform for Stockport's school children; whilst some have enjoyed online lessons and regular internet-based support, many do not have adequate Wi-Fi, relying on smart phones with contract limitations on how much could be downloaded. Some will not have had that.

We had several comments about the Stockport Local Assistance Scheme, including provision of small affordable loans in conjunction with Stockport Credit Union. <https://www.stockport.gov.uk/stockport-local-assistance-scheme> . One Councillor said that SLAS has been remodelled to bring more money into the town for our most vulnerable residents

Tackling inequality is both structural and a matter of orientation: one participant reminded us that some of the older generation are relatively well off, whilst many younger people are finding things tough – not least because of the pandemic. However, we recognised that all of us need to be kind and supportive to all generations.

We were reminded of the inequalities often faced by people with various disabilities: one participant gave some clear examples of how poor planning can particularly impact people with disabilities and several agreed that there is a need to involve people of all types of disability in planning decisions.

Cllr Amanda Peers noted the value of “participation of those with real life experiences to be involved in decision making eg increased pedestrianisation means greater walking distances for those with mobility issues.”

There were several comments about Stockport Council as an employer and one exchange illustrates the complexity:

- Cllr Mark Weldon stated: “SMBC do pay the living wage. Back in 2013 when I was SMBC deputy leader I chaired a cross party working group to implement it.”
- Rev Cathy Bird acknowledged this - but “Yes SMBC do pay Living wage as far as I understand but it would be great to be public about that by becoming officially accredited - this helps to encourage other organisations.”
- But again from Cllr Mark Weldon : “re living wage accreditation ; SMBC have been unwilling to pay for the accreditation for no effective benefit.”

### **e) Education**

Two themes recurred in several discussions about education:

- Thanks and congratulations to our schools who have kept going throughout, to accommodate vulnerable children and the children of key workers and are wrestling with issues with wider opening, now and in September
- Provision for over-16s and over-18s, especially for those who will not pursue the academic routes of A-levels and university. Provision must encourage intellectual development as well as job training.

Several people emphasised the importance of real world education – learning life skills and with more emphasis on interconnection of arts / science /social fields.

### **f) Third Sector**

Note: “Third sector organisations’ is a term used to describe the range of organisations that are neither public sector nor private sector. It includes voluntary and community organisations (both registered charities and other organisations such as associations, self-help groups and community groups), social enterprises, mutuals and co-operatives.” (National Audit Office).

We recognised that community groups had been invaluable since the start of lockdown, supporting vulnerable neighbours with prescription and food deliveries – and much more in some areas. One participant reported on a community group operating on the Bosden Farm estate: “A silver lining of COVID, on Bosden Farm we got to know our neighbours just a bit better. 46% got to know 3 or 4 new neighbours, 32% linked up with 1 or 2 new neighbours and 4% met 5 or more neighbours. 18% didn't meet any new neighbours - that was often because they already know them all!” However, as an example of the pressures, this estate does not have many community facilities.

Councillor Amanda Peers said: “we are currently working with the community and voluntary sector to develop a forward strategy to create a support infrastructure that enables future growth of the third sector. This is a key priority in my portfolio we have made some financial

investment for the work to progress and will continue to provide funding through Stockport Local Fund”.

Others reminded us of the challenges:

- “Voluntary sector vital in Stockport but training for governance and people staying once they've been trained is an issue.”
- “We face a possible future crisis in volunteering as the pension age rises”
- “Not just Key workers. Volunteers have been taken for granted and exploited too.”

One participant suggested: “Challenge people: why not join a voluntary activity to benefit the community?”

Rev Cathy Bird reminded us that finding ways to enable churches and other faith communities to use their premises for the community is important.

#### **g) Health**

Health was alluded to several times – not surprisingly in a time of Covid-19. We were certainly aware of mental health and that influenced some of the comments made above – but we recognised at the end that we had not discussed this at any depth.

#### **h) Social care**

Our discussions around social care were also not in depth. It was mentioned on a number of occasions and we recognised how people typically not valued in status or remuneration had done - and are doing - great things. The response to the pandemic has only emphasised that to us.

#### **i) Leisure**

This was discussed by several participants – recognising the value that leisure facilities add to a community and also some of the pressures faced by the Council in providing them. We discussed the “Life Leisure Dialstone” centre – confusingly to some of us, this is the name of the facility on the site of the old Offerton High School. Cllr Dawson agreed with others that this was not as good as it could be and described some moves he had made for improvement.

One participant mentioned the Good Gym <https://www.goodgym.org/areas/stockport> “GoodGym helps you get fit by doing good. We’re a group of runners that combines regular exercise with helping our communities.”

## j) General points

- There were several mentions of Stockport Credit Union, which is based at First House, website = <https://www.stockportcu.com/> Credit Unions are owned and controlled by their members.
- Several advocated working cross-party to address many of the big issues confronting us
- There were various comments about the value of local income tax or Land Tax or alternative systems

## Final Poll

Towards the end of the meeting, we invited everyone to say where they would like us to focus our next Good Society meeting. The top choices were:

- Voluntary Sector Partnerships
- Social care and
- Poverty, Inequality and Deprivation

Watch this space – possible date (to be confirmed) for our next meeting is Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> September 2020.

## Thank you

Very many thanks to all who took part in this meeting and / or sent questions in advance – and for your words of encouragement (and gentle disagreement). We are pleased to do our best for something we – and you – think is important.

Would you please forward this report and other information about The Good Society to anyone whom you think might be interested? I would really like to expand our mailing list and encourage others to take part.

Very many thanks

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