

Text included in New Ash Green Village Association newsletter

The problems affecting the shopping centre in New Ash Green were highlighted last July in a petition presented by a resident, Victoria Barnard, to a meeting of Sevenoaks District Council. She asked for the Council to take a more active role in ensuring the current landowners bring the centre up to an acceptable standard. After a debate, all councillors supported her request and referred it to the Cabinet for a co-ordinated approach to the issues and asked for a report in six months.

This was discussed further at a Cabinet meeting in September where a long report from officers explained what the Council could do and where it had no legal powers to intervene. The Council cannot become involved in private disputes between the several landowners, or between landowners and their tenants. However they will continue to focus on supporting and bringing forward the regeneration of the centre, ensuring that the community is engaged in the process; they will support and facilitate the New Ash Green Town Team; carry out functions relating to statutory services including environmental health, building control, licensing and planning development; and continue to support Community Safety activities such as Environmental Visual Audits and the Community Safety Focus Group.

During the summer, a Section 215 Improvement Notice was served by the Council on the principal landowner requiring specific repairs to be carried out. Some have been completed but others are still outstanding, notably the repair of the shopfront canopies in The Row and The Link. Instead of repairing the canopies, the landowner put in a planning application to remove them entirely - this sparked a significant divergence of opinion locally with some people seeing the canopies, if properly repaired, as beneficial to the shops and their customers whilst others felt they were inconsistent with the original architectural concept and the benefits of their removal would outweigh any minor loss of occasional shelter. The Council's decision on the application was still awaited at the time of going to press but whichever way it goes, the Council will continue to look for more ways to improve the appearance of the centre.

Meanwhile, Council officers have been trying to obtain further details from the landowners about their future intentions. Despite initial hopeful signs, when an architect was appointed by the landowner to revisit the regeneration proposals first seen in 2008, subsequently it has been impossible to arrange any further meetings with the landowners or the architects so the officers will be redoubling their efforts to press for information.

The Town Team and Sevenoaks Council are committed to improving the village centre as far as they can and they are supported in this by the Parish Council and Village Association. The fact that the area is in private hands means that the opportunities for making improvements are dependent on securing the co-operation of the landowners and working with them rather than against them. It is often a difficult balancing act but also a challenge that will continue to be pursued as vigorously as possible.