**HS2 Meeting Update – Cllr Anna Lee**

On 31st January I attended a meeting of Ward councillors at CWaC’s offices in Winsford to discuss the proposed HS2 scheme. There were 15 of us altogether: 12 councillors, three CWaC hosts and one HS2 representative. The main purpose of the meeting was to allow Ward Councillors to air concerns and to question a representative of HS2 Ltd. This article is a summary of the notes I took during the meeting.

Councillor Brian Jamieson, of Northwich Town Council, said that, whilst the original route had been changed because it was found to be going through the Holford brine fields and the gas storage area, the new route was infinitely worse as it ran through Winsford Salt Mine, Lostock Gralam, Wincham, Marston and Billinge Green - all areas where there were countless uncharted underground cavities filled with pressurised gas. Others added that the new route also went over a proposed Flood Relief Area. John Atkinson, the HS2 representative, was asked if his organisation was aware of any of this. Mr. Atkinson wasn’t sure, and explained that he had only joined the company a few months earlier.

Cllr Jamieson also expressed fears that the new route would involve the demolition of a housing site on Cookes Lane and the diversion of the A556. Given the number of vehicles which travel along that stretch of the A556 (i.e. adjacent to Gadbrook Park, Roberts Bakery and Morrisons warehouse), and the likely duration of such works, the impact on local people and the wider business community would be considerable. There was general horror at this prospect, given the severe traffic congestion caused by the works associated with the current Bowdon to Knutsford A556 diversion. Someone else pointed out that the potential cost of necessary underground remedial works would be immense, given that before any substantive work on Barons Quay was begun, some £35m was spent filling the four mines under the site with concrete. We were asked for our views on the proposed location of a rolling stock depot near Crewe. Everyone who spoke (and there were several) opposed it, mainly because it would occupy prime farmland, and the site of a school and a Grade 2 listed barn.

A number of people expressed concerns about the impact on local infrastructure which, they claimed, was already inadequate as it had not kept pace with the increase in the area’s population. In particular, they cited the inadequate roads crossing the various rivers and canals in the area. John Atkinson was asked a number of questions about the exact location and likely height and width of the embankments which would be necessary along the proposed route as it travelled through the CWaC area. He could not say precisely, but did not deny that they would be in the order of 18m (approx. 60’) or more high. Some said the route shown on the map was misleading because it failed to show the full width of the railway in those places where it ran along an embankment.

With these concerns in mind, a number of people asked Mr. Atkinson if it would be possible to have a scale model available to present at a consultation meeting, scheduled to be held on 9th March. Mr. Atkinson very much doubted it. Someone commented that HS2 was a very long way from even being finally approved, still less becoming a reality, adding that we were “still three years away from formal plans being put to the Secretary of State.” Someone else noted that Andrew Tyrie, MP, chair of the House of Commons Treasury Select Committtee, had complained about ‘a lack of rigour’ in the business case for HS2. Finally, someone asked Mr. Atkinson why it was that residents opposed to the scheme were having to find and fund their own experts to examine and advise on the scheme (and apparently learning more than was known by HS2) whilst, in the case of, say, a proposed housing development, it would be up to the developer to carry out any geological survey.

Mr. Atkinson didn’t know. All in all, I rather think that Mr. Atkinson left the meeting having learnt more than the councillors had.