

When Urban Gravesham, the Civic Society for Gravesend, set up its stalls to collect signatures against the Heritage Quarter scheme, it was very common for people at the stall to describe Councillors as being in the pockets of big developers, and even corrupt. Even the most mild mannered people were cynical about local politicians.

For the record, Urban Gravesham does not agree with this. Most councillors work hard, and they care about their town. Most importantly, Councillors are the only group with a democratic mandate to make decisions on behalf of the rest of us.

No one can challenge that. However, it's obvious from the Council's statements that Councillors resent Urban Gravesham's campaigns against the Heritage and Transport Quarters. Some even seem to believe that UG's activities have been a direct challenge to the Council's authority, and therefore anti-democratic.

This is wrong. The quid-pro-quo of democratic power is that interest groups, and even individuals, must always have the right to campaign, to seek to persuade, and above all to hold the Council to account. The right to challenge those in power exists, and must always, exist in law.

And that is what we have done. Urban Gravesham and the tens of thousands of citizens who stood up to be counted can feel immensely proud of what has been achieved in their campaign for the sympathetic development of the town's heritage quarter. They held our elected representatives to account and got the 32 storey tower thrown out. And they successfully challenged the Council in the courts to have St Andrews Gardens protected from mass development forever.

It's also worth bearing in mind that the most likely outcome of the judge's ruling (to let the Council's final decision on the Heritage Quarter stand) will not be the planned high rise development of undersized flats, but instead planning blight and delay. Just like developer Edinburgh House's other regeneration scheme in Castleford, in fact. It's therefore highly likely that Councillors will have to think again over the future of the town centre. When that happens, Urban Gravesham will still be here.

In the meantime, Urban Gravesham will consider whether to appeal the judge's decision. This is a move that would be feared by Council Leader John Burden because it would mean that the final decision on whether to grant planning permission to the Heritage Quarter scheme would rest with his fellow Councillors. Of course, had our Council Leader agreed to such a radical democratic move in the first instance, the Council would have saved itself the time and money of the Court Case.

In the meantime, also, there is a small democratic matter, of some importance to Councillors, to be taken into consideration - the local elections in May.

UG would like to thank our many members and supporters and assure everyone that we will continue to represent those people who care about the future and the heritage of our town centre.

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