I am disappointed by the draft Local Plan that has been produced by East Hertfordshire District Council (EHDC) and do not believe it is positively prepared, justified, effective or consistent with national policy, especially with regard to the site at the East of Stevenage, known as ‘Gresley Park’.

Policy DPS1 of the draft Local Plan, states the first guiding principal in preparing the plan is “to allocate sufficient sites in order to meet the full housing needs of East Herts.” EHDC states in section 3.2.7 that “the Government released new household projections in July 2016...Following the release of these figures, further work on the SHMA has shown that the level of housing need in the District has increased to around 19,500 new homes by 2033”. It is clear that EHDC’s own DPS1 policy will not be met, as the plan provides 3,110 homes less than required – a staggering shortfall. Consequently, EHDC policies DPS2 and DPS3 are also unsound as they are based on the lower figure, which fails to meet EHDC’s own stated housing need during the plan period. I do not believe that the shortfall can be met by way of an early review throughout the plan, and feel EHDC need to account for all need in the area and provide an additional buffer to safeguard any sites which may become undeliverable throughout the process.

I understand that EHDC accept Garden towns and villages are the key to resolving much of their housing need. In fact they have formally applied for Government funding for the north of Harlow development to be a Garden village. However, they have refused to consider working with Stevenage Borough Council (SBC) and North Herts District Council (NHDC) to develop a Garden City of over 20,000 homes to help towards resolving the housing need for all three local authorities.

Additionally, local people consider the consultation to have been a sham and fait accompli, which is difficult to refute, as concerns from local communities have been ignored.

EHDC have prepared a memorandum of understanding with some local authorities, however, it is clear from the SBC Local Plan Hearings that they have not co-operated with each other to any real extent and are acting in isolation. For example, I note at 2.40 in EHDC’s Duty to Cooperate statement they claim that the ‘Gresley Park’ site at Stevenage would require a new secondary school. The proposed new secondary school at the old Barnwell East site, is not a proposal, but land safeguarded for educational use and is currently used by Stevenage Education Support Centre. Furthermore, any new secondary school in this area would have a serious financial impact on the viability of the existing Stevenage secondary schools and is unlikely to be viable during this draft Local Plan period.

Furthermore, the plan does not provide any specific mitigation schemes for the transport modelling of several villages, yet many local roads are already struggling with the high volume of cars that pass through. EHDC claim to be working with some local authorities to assess the transport modelling needed, however they have failed to work with SBC on assessing the need which an additional 600
homes would add to the already over used Gresley Way. It was made clear at SBC’s Local Plan Hearings that they have no plans to change or amend the roads at Gresley Way, or the village lanes behind the development leading to Aston.

The proposed development at the East of Stevenage, known as ‘Gresley Park’, has been widely condemned by local people, Aston Parish Council, PACE – an Action group set up to protect Aston, District Councillors, County Councillor and local Members of Parliament.

Aston Parish has already lost 250 hectares of Green Belt land, about 25% of its former area, to enable some 5,571 homes to be built in Poplars, Chells and Chells Manor in Stevenage. Housing some 13,000 residents, these developments increased the town’s population by 20% and were transferred from EHDC’s administrative boundary into SBC’s. This proposed development would more than double Aston Parish’s current housing stock and population.

I contacted EHDC to clarify why they had previously objected to the use of the Land to the East of Stevenage and refused to include it only 12 months ago in their site allocations. The Principal Planning Officer stated:

- “The Land to the east of Stevenage would be disconnected from main road and rail networks and centres of retail and employment which are orientated to the west of the town. An urban extension of 5,000 homes to the east of the town would require considerable supporting infrastructure which would be deemed unattractive to employers and investors, not able to compete with or complement the existing retail offer or too costly in terms of the provision of road networks.
- The scale of development would require a large land take that would be detrimental to the Beane valley, a wide valley containing rare and valuable chalk stream environments.
- Alternative locations within East Herts were available and would meet the needs determined at that time. Alternative sites were also available and sequentially preferable around the north and west of Stevenage as established by the Stevenage and North Herts Area Action Plan which could meet development needs within the sub-regional context. Therefore land to the east of the town was not needed to accommodate the needs of Stevenage.”

It is apparent that EHDC consider the ‘very special circumstances’ required to build on Green Belt, as set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), to be purely housing need. However, both the previous and current Secretaries of State and Housing Ministers have made it clear that housing need alone is not enough to reach the threshold required to meet the very special circumstances test and build on precious Green Belt land. This has only been strengthened in the Government’s Housing White Paper published February 2017.

It is shocking that East Herts District Council want to breach the Beane Valley and build on what they call ‘Gresley Park’. This would be the first step towards the destruction of the Beane Valley and merger of Aston into Stevenage. This proposed development should be removed immediately from the draft Local Plan as unsound and undeliverable. I agree with the concerns and objections raised by Aston Parish Council and PACE, which detail a number of reasons that illustrate why this site should be withdrawn from the draft Local Plan.

It is time they stopped ignoring local people, scrap these ridiculous Local Plans and start working together to build a new Garden City to help resolve housing need locally.

Stephen McPartland
Member of Parliament for Stevenage

September 2017