

Meet the Neighbours - North Herts District Council

Date: Wednesday 24 April 2013

Present: Cllr Mike Carver (EHC)
Claire Sime (EHC)
Jenny Pierce (EHC)
Cllr Tom Brindley (NHDC)
Louise Symes (NHDC)

Matters Discussed

The A1(M) Corridor
Airports
Community Infrastructure Levy
Gypsies and Travellers
Progress with Local/District Plans

The A1(M) Corridor

1. Discussion was had over the importance of the A1(M) in supporting the existing and potential development of North Herts District Council, Welwyn Hatfield, Stevenage and Central Bedfordshire Boroughs. The four councils have drafted a letter to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government to converse with the Secretary of State for Transport to highlight the apparent inconsistencies in their approach. The A1(M) cannot cope under existing pressures and there are no plans to improve the capacity of the road. Without these improvements, major development along this corridor will not be possible. NHDC requested that East Herts may wish to counter-sign this letter as there are many issues associated with the A1(M) that affect East Herts. EHC agreed to counter-sign this letter to add support to the arguments.

Airports

2. NHDC do not object in principle to the Luton Airport increasing passenger numbers if it can be contained within existing infrastructure. The Council does not think that such an increase can be met without major infrastructure improvements. The Council would therefore continue to seek restrictions on noise, transport etc and would also seek mitigation measures from any development of the Airport. It was felt that because the development of the Airport has national importance, any application should be dealt with nationally rather than just by the local authority.
3. East Herts had equally responded concerning Luton Airport and impacts on the infrastructure.

4. EHC noted similar concerns with Stansted Airport and a consistent approach in terms of acknowledging the benefits the proximity to the airports bring, but limiting the downsides of this proximity. Now that Manchester Airports Group own the airport they appear to be much more open about what the ambitions for the airport services are and because of their shared background in local government, understand our concerns and our potential role in the continued success of the airport.
5. EHC suggested that NHDC consider becoming members of SASIG (Strategic Aviation Special Interest Group).

Gypsies and Travellers

6. Discussion occurred about an appeal at a site in Welwyn Hatfield Borough where the five year land supply was raised as an issue in considering the appeal. The Council only fractionally won the appeal but the impression was that unless they resolved the issue over the supply of pitches, if the appeal came round again it would be allowed. NHDC were concerned because they have a similar site with potentially similar issues. They have a site which could accommodate an additional pitch but the site is occupied by a single family and may be unlikely to accommodate any other family.
7. A brief discussion occurred over the Birch Green Site in Hertingfordbury which has yet to receive a decision. EHC indicated that the Council were preparing to tender for an update to our needs assessment, however, we were constrained by the lack of a decision by PINS over the status of the occupiers at the Esbies site in Sawbridgeworth. EHC were writing to PINS to request a speedier decision in order to enable the Council to continue in the preparation of the evidence base.
8. NHDC indicated that as part of the previous SNAP proposal, consideration was given to providing a G&T site. This may still be considered as an option to the north east of their housing option location to the north of Stevenage. NHDC questioned whether a cross-border site could be allowed under the NPPF. NHDC are presently undertaking a G&T assessment.
9. NHDC indicated a desire to increase the sharing of knowledge, particularly when families are moving around. There was also a desire to see a county-wide action plan, a common approach to dealing with illegal encampments.
10. EH Indicated it had a procedure in place and had been successful in quickly bringing court orders against illegal encampments. NHDC wished for this information to be shared.

CIL

11. NHDC explained that the work they have done so far indicates that as they have a variety of land values depending on their location a single charge would not be realistic. Although they expressed some concern about the practicality of the CIL in the long term, NHDC are continuing to prepare a CIL in parallel with the plan.
12. EHC agreed with this doubt mainly because the long term projections involved are just guesswork after a certain timeframe and stated that there are many benefits of the Section 106 system such as the ability to negotiate on a site-by-site basis. There were also issues with CIL relating to the fact that utility providers do not plan for more than 10 years, and five years with any certainty. EHC suggested that there may be a delay with releasing a CIL charging schedule until it is more certain on the proposed development strategy. A separate CIL consultation may be necessary. EHC were concerned about the slowing down of the process related to introducing CIL and the requirements of further evidence bases. In turn, this would have an impact on the deliverability of the District Plan without resolution.

Local Plan Update

13. EHC cannot move forward without evidence relating to education and highways. The schools across EH are at capacity and the uncertainty of free schools and academies makes education planning more complicated.
14. EHC wish to speak to the Government regarding having a plan which is fully evidenced for the first 10 years with reviews every five years.
15. NHDC are of the view that the County Council have a statutory duty to provide for the education needs of children, and that the lack of school places should not necessarily prevent NHDC from giving consideration to building houses. NHDC do have capacity in some of its schools and the proposed strategic sites would need to make provision for additional education needs.
16. EHC disagreed. It is necessary to have a deliverable plan. Huge demographic changes are forcing up needs. EHC have a close working relationship with the County Council and have been receiving advice on education planning to assist with the plan preparation. EHC have information regarding primary level capacity issues and are awaiting secondary level information. There are capacity issues at all levels across the district. EHC indicated that it wouldn't feel comfortable proceeding on the basis that it is someone else's problem. EHC want to plan properly to address issues such as community infrastructure and indicated that the County Council would be likely to object to a plan which did not adequately address the educational need of its residents.

17. With regards to policy preparation, EH is combining two plans into one single District Plan. Each policy area is being dealt with as a whole to create flexible policies, making them user-friendly and suitable for both the short and longer term.
18. EHC do not have a five year land supply. EHC have a wide housing figure range of between 10 and 17 thousand homes, and indicated that recent demographic forecasts are indicating the need to plan for towards the upper end of this range.
19. NHDC advised that they had a SHMA undertaken in 2012 which demonstrates a range of figures. The proposed figure of 10 700 is considered a reasonable number and takes into consideration low trend migration, including impacts of migration associated with Great Ashby and the East of England forecasting model, based on economic considerations. . The evidence in place for available sites from their SHLAA indicate they have three times the amount of available land than they need for their housing need.
20. NHDC wish to see Stevenage's evidence with regards to housing need rather than their aspirations. NHDC indicate that their response to Stevenage is that SBC should continue to look all around their borders to accommodate their needs.
21. NHDC indicated that Central Bedfordshire Council have a different approach and are pushing NHDC to use the same approach – to allocate the needs arising from immigration on a town-by-town basis. C.Beds have indicated that if they then cannot accommodate migration needs other locations including NHDC should accommodate them instead. NHDC stated that if they had to accommodate this type of need as well it would push their housing figure to much more than they need even at their own higher migration level suggests.
22. On other cross-boundary issues, EHC indicated that Welwyn Hatfield Council had allocated 400 homes of it's targets in land within EH. Cllr Brindley stated that as his interests lie in Hertingfordbury as well, that the parish might accept some form of development contiguous with Welwyn Garden City as it could see some of the benefits to the community that could be gained from CIL contributions and other development gains.
23. EHC indicated they intend to consult on their preferred strategy towards the end of 2013, and have set up a working forum of 15 Members covering the whole district to comment and advise on the emerging planning policies. Officers have been meeting regularly with Development Management colleagues on the policies.
24. NHDC plan to submit in June 2014 following a Local Plan consultation in January 2014. They have a Local Plan Working Party with comprising 7 Members and would consider expanding the spread of Members like

EHC have. NHDC are also working closely with Development Management colleagues on policies.

25. As part of their Housing Growth consultation, NHDC undertook roadshows where the whole Policy team met members of the public in an open format. More than 1,200 people attended and most of them that did have not responded to the consultation. They get the impression that even if they don't like what is being proposed, at least they now understand the process and the reasons for the proposals.
26. With regards to site-specifics, NHDC indicated that the proposal to the north of Stevenage may require an additional access around Great Ashby Park which would be on land in EH. Local electricity pylons could be buried, which may have enabled access through the pylon corridor but the national grid lines could not be buried which may prevent this opportunity.
27. The land to the west of Stevenage is still being held by the Secretary of State who has yet to make a decision. NHDC have been told that the SoS/Planning Inspectorate are unlikely to re-open an inquiry on this land until they know if it is included in NHDC Local Plan. NHDC don't know whether to include it in their Plan until they receive a decision from the SoS.
28. Other smaller sites would not impinge on EHC and were not discussed. Knebworth was discussed as a potential location for locally significant growth. Four sites are proposed but the local school is already too small for the current demand. EHC suggested a land swap could be possible and that the levels of local growth combined with existing demand may result in the need for a new single form of entry primary school.

Future Work

29. Both authorities agreed for further meetings on a similar basis as required in the future. Both agreed on the usefulness of meetings of this kind and welcomed the sharing of practice and information.