

East Herts District Council – Stevenage Borough Council Meeting Notes

Date/time: Tuesday 24th March 2015, 10am

Venue: East Herts Council Offices, Wallfields, Hertford

Attendees:

East Herts District Council

Cllr Mike Carver (MC) Executive Member for Strategic Planning and Transport

Martin Paine (MP) Senior Planning Officer

Jenny Pierce (JP) Senior Planning Officer

Chris Butcher (CBu) Senior Planning Officer

Stevenage Council

Cllr. John Gardiner (JG) Deputy Leader and Executive Member for Planning and Regeneration

Richard Javes (RJ) Planning Policy Manager

Caroline Danby (CD) Principal Planning Officer

Meeting Notes:

Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA)

1. MP indicated that East Herts Council (EHC) is in the process of undertaking a SHMA for its housing market area which also comprises Harlow, Uttlesford and Epping Forest Councils. MC indicated that the initial findings from the draft SHMA suggest that the Objectively Assessed Housing Need figure is not significantly different from the figure of 750 dwellings per annum that formed the basis of the District Plan Preferred Options document. Meeting housing need in the first five years will be a significant challenge, particularly when the short fall from 2011-2016 is factored in, alongside the requirement to include a suitable buffer. MP indicated that EHC also needs to consider cross boundary issues with neighbouring authorities on the western side of the District, including Stevenage and Welwyn Hatfield Councils.
2. RJ indicated that Stevenage Borough Council (SBC) is also in the process of undertaking a SHMA with North Herts and Central Bedfordshire Councils. It is currently expected that the SHMA will be finalised in the next couple of months. The initial findings suggest that the Objectively Assessed Housing Need Figure will increase significantly compared to previous projections. SBC have also had cross boundary discussions with Luton Borough Council although they are not part of the A1(M) housing market area.
3. MP noted that ORS has been commissioned to undertake both SHMA's which should help ensure a consistent approach to identifying Objectively Assessed Housing Need across the wider sub-region.

East of Stevenage

4. MP indicated that, as part of the assessment of growth options across the District, a potential development of around 5,000 dwellings located to the East of Stevenage had been assessed. This option had been rejected, largely on the basis of the impact on the Beane Valley and the fact that the development would be on the wrong side of Stevenage in terms of accessing employment opportunities and the A1(M).
5. It was noted that SBC had previously suggested, through its response to the East Herts District Plan Preferred Options consultation, that a smaller proposal of around 500 – 750 dwellings should also be assessed. MP stated that testing a smaller scale development would assist in satisfying an Inspector at Examination that all reasonable alternatives had been assessed in accordance with national guidance. A significant amount of evidence will need to be gathered in order to assess this option. As part of this process, EHC will be working with the County Council to undertake some modelling in order to understand the transport impacts of development in this location.
6. RJ suggested that SBC would support development East of Stevenage as it could contribute to the Borough's housing requirement. MC reiterated that EHC has a significant challenge in meeting its housing needs in the first five years following adoption of the District Plan, and that any potential development in this location would be required to help meet this requirement. RJ indicated that this issue could be addressed at a later stage once EHC has gathered the necessary evidence and undertaken a full assessment of the site.
7. RJ stated that there is likely to be sufficient secondary education capacity in the town to cater for development East of Stevenage. MP suggested that a new primary school may be required on site if the yield was around 750 dwellings. RJ indicated that providing a suitable method for pedestrians to cross Gresley Way would be a key issue to address. There is a proposal to turn Gresley Way into the A602 in order to divert traffic from the town centre. This would likely increase the amount of traffic using Gresley Way.

West of Stevenage

8. RJ explained that North Herts District Council had identified land West of Stevenage as a location for growth within their draft Local Plan. However SBC had objected on the basis that development could be brought forward earlier in the plan period. A significant amount of land in that area is owned by the HCA and SBC including land that would be required to access the site. In the view of SBC, development in this location could be brought forward before 2021 subject to agreement with development partners.

9. RJ suggested that approximately 1,900 dwellings could be provided within the Borough boundary in this location. In order to provide more than this figure, land in North Herts would be required. Development beyond 1,900 dwellings would also require significant investment in transport infrastructure, including the construction of a new road which would pass under the existing route of the A1(M). RJ advised that while tunnelling under the A1(M) would be expensive, creating a bridge would not be viable due to the existing height of the A1(M) which is routed on an embankment in this location.
10. MP suggested that west of Stevenage could be brought forward sooner if the evidence is there to support it. RJ indicated that while SBC could bring forward 1,900 dwellings within their boundary, a more favourable approach would be to secure cross boundary co-operation with NHDC to provide a larger, more comprehensive development.

Community Infrastructure Levy

11. RJ indicated that SBC has commissioned a whole plan viability study, one of the outputs of which is to recommend whether or not CIL should be pursued or not. Similarly, MP confirmed that EHC have also commissioned consultants to assess the potential for CIL through the Delivery Study. MC suggested that it might be beneficial for the eleven Hertfordshire authorities to get legal advice on CIL, particularly with regards to pooling restrictions on S106 contributions.

Employment

12. MC indicated that EHC intend to continue with the existing employment strategy in terms of protecting existing sites while recognising that the District will remain reliant on neighbouring authorities, as well as London, to meet the majority of its employment needs. MP noted that in recent Examinations a number of Inspectors have raised the importance of reconciling the relationship between housing and employment forecasts. EHC is working with Housing Market Area partners to the east (Uttlesford, Harlow and Epping Forest Councils) in order to address this issue.
13. RJ suggested that SBC is currently looking at the Functional Economic Market Area (FEMA) with NHDC and Central Bedfordshire Council. Political agreement will be required between the authorities in order to decide where new employment land should go. Gunnels Wood in Stevenage currently has an exception for the use of prior approvals to convert office space to residential, although there is a concern that this exception could be removed by Government in future. Should this occur, the regeneration of the town centre could be undermined.

Waste Water Infrastructure

14. RJ indicated that most of Stevenage falls under the remit of Thames Water which drains to Rye Mead STW. A small area on the north western part of the town falls within the Anglian region. While Thames Water is largely dependent on Rye Meads, Anglian use a larger number of smaller facilities which generally makes it easier to find solutions. MP stated that he had spoken to Richard Reeves from Thames Water who suggested that Rye Meads should have sufficient capacity for 22,000 additional homes up to 2031. RJ noted that the companies have a statutory duty to deal with waste water treatment but that it is a question of timing the phasing of development to fit in with their investment strategies.

AOB

15. MP indicated that work on the EHC District Plan had been slightly delayed due to the need to wait for the completion of a number of key evidence studies. It is hoped that a Pre-Submission consultation will be undertaken by the end of the year. RJ suggested that a 4 week consultation on a strategic housing strategy will be undertaken on the SBC Local Plan in summer, while the Pre-Submission stage plan should be agreed by Executive in autumn.