

WOOLMER GREEN PARISH COUNCIL

Minutes of Public Meeting on Wednesday 12th October 2016

In attendance:

Borough Councillors Julie Cragg; Steve Markeiwicz & Mandy Perkins, Executive Member for Planning, Housing & Community.

Parish Councillors Andy Gribble, Chairman; Sarah Hall; Jenny Hawkins; Grant Pinney & Anthony White.

Parish Clerk, Janet Pearce.

Kevin Fitzgerald of Herts CPRE and representing Save Woolmer Green.

Five representatives of the owners of Entech.

Councillor Andy Gribble, Chairman.

Cllr Gribble welcomed everyone to the meeting and thanked residents for coming. He introduced the three Borough Councillors, Kevin Fitzgerald and the representatives from Entech. He explained that every area in the country has to have an adopted Local Plan that is in line with Government policy and meets the requirements of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). The Local Plan is the blueprint that shapes future development and one of its main requirements is to increase the supply of housing.

Welwyn Hatfield have been gathering evidence since 2009 and encouraged landowners to submit land for consideration. The favoured sites form the basis of the Welwyn Hatfield draft Local Plan and the Objectively Assessed Need (OAN) is for 12,500 new homes.

Woolmer Green has been allocated 150 houses on the Green Belt behind Marshalls, Cawdor Stone & Lessiters (HS15) and three areas, including the Entech site, have been designated employment land (EA10). The owners of Entech are proposing that 75 houses could be accommodated on their site along with offices & shops including a convenience store.

The Parish Council maintains that "exceptional circumstances" have not been demonstrated to re-define the Green Belt in Woolmer Green as a brownfield site is available. The village is also in need of a sustainable convenience store. A 25% increase in housing has been applied across the board which the Parish Council considers is too many when Woolmer Green has increased by 50% in the last 20 years already due to businesses closing. The danger is that after marketing the Entech site for three years it will not attract a big investor and Woolmer Green will have to accommodate 225 houses; a 37% increase.

The Chairman urged residents to respond to the consultation, and there is help with this on the Parish Council's web site, sign the Save Woolmer Green petition, write to their Borough Councillors and their MP, Grant Shapps, who supports Woolmer Green Parish Council's approach. The consultation is the last chance to influence the outcome and everyone needs to respond.

Graeme Price, representing the owners of Entech.

Graeme thanked the Parish Council for the invitation to the meeting.

He represents the owners of Entech and their aim was to maximise the potential of the site for the benefit of the community. There would continue to be employment on the site within the shops and offices and they would look to provide a convenience store.

To rejuvenate the old factory site would require significant investment for redevelopment. Our scheme offers the best opportunity for Woolmer Green.

Kevin Fitzgerald, CPRE & Save Woolmer Green.

The Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) are looking at all district plans and 40,000 houses could be built on Green Belt in Hertfordshire; one of the highest in the country.

Borough Councillors say that the Government are insisting they do it. The Government say they are committed to protecting the Green Belt and it can only be built on if there are "exceptional circumstances" and community support. Once it is gone it is gone for good and communities merging together could be the future.

It is important that everyone responds to the consultation. Councillors don't want to do this; give them the ammunition to fight it. It is contrary to Government policy.

Cllr Mandy Perkins, Executive Member for Planning, Housing & Community.

There always has been a District Plan. The last one was in 2005 for 5 years, now we have to do one for 15 years. House numbers are arrived at by a methodology set out by the Government called an Objectively Assessed Need (OAN) which was calculated to be between 12,600 & 13,600. We can't get to 13,600 so we are aiming at just over 12,000 in Welwyn Hatfield.

The Borough Council has been working on the Local Plan since 2009 and during 2012/13 all housing was proposed for the edges of the towns of Hatfield and Welwyn Garden City but they thought that was unfair so it was decided to share the growth. Villages do need sustainable growth so we tried to apportion it so that it is fair. Coalescence is a priority as each settlement has its own characteristics.

The employment sites in Woolmer Green are unchanged, they have always been for employment and we need those areas for employment. Entech has lots of protected trees on the site so they are unlikely to be able to build more than 45 houses and there would be no room for employment. If Entech was developed you may have to lose Green Belt to provide employment land.

The Borough Council hasn't chosen the sites in the Local Plan they have been put forward by landowners and developers. Half of the 12,000 houses are on brownfield sites. Once the Green Belt has been re-designated it can't be changed again until 2032. People want to live in Hertfordshire so we have to provide the houses and we also need to have open space within towns.

We have to have a Local Plan by spring 2017 or the Government have threatened to send in planners to take over our planning and we will have something imposed on us. If the Plan is found to be unsound we will have to start again and that would be a lot of work and very costly.

Questions.

Resident: The Government are imposing plans in Lancashire although the people object.

Cllr Perkins: I urge you to comment on the Local Plan. The owners of the Green Belt site care about Woolmer Green and have offered a shop on the site.

Mr Fitzgerald: I agree you need to comment. They will go before a Government planning inspector.

Resident: You say there's a need as people want to live in Herts but 70% of apartments in Stevenage go to investors. Of the 150 houses none will be for local people.

Mr Fitzgerald: Some want to encourage people to come to Herts.

Cllr Perkins: The Government definition for social housing is now affordable housing. Of the 150 houses 35% will be affordable.

Resident: 300,000 people have moved out of London as they can't afford the rents. People are being pushed out; where will it finish?

Cllr Perkins: I take that on board.

Resident: 75 houses can be built on Entech but why save trees and only allow 45 houses?

Resident: You could save a whole field instead of a few trees.

Resident: How will you provide more schools and hospitals?

Cllr Perkins: Hospital provision is out of our hands. We have checked with the County Council and they assure us there will be sufficient primary school places in Woolmer Green and Welwyn.

Resident: Let's have a show of hands of those in favour of the 150 houses. (no member of the public raises their hand). There was a school proposed on that land and we fought that. The landowner keeps putting it forward. We have an ancient sewerage system, youngsters can't afford to buy here, 150 houses is too much. We vote for you; you should be fighting our corner.

Resident: How do we lobby and argue there are not "exceptional circumstances"? We need to get the number of houses reduced but we're told the need can't be reduced.

Mr Fitzgerald: It is up to the Borough Council to calculate the need. Government guidance is not clear. Neighbouring Councils are querying each other's numbers and you have two Councils arguing. Meeting need is not "exceptional circumstances" to build on the Green Belt.

Cllr Perkins: We have a duty to co-operate. We have to consult with North Herts Council.

Resident: It's all about proportion. 75 houses are too many. 150 is an increase to the village of 25%.

Resident: Has there been a survey on traffic? Accessing the A1M is impossible; it will grind to a halt.

Cllr Perkins: Herts County Council is responsible for highways. They assure us the road network can take it. A survey would not be done to avoid congestion but on highway safety grounds. There is another consultation "Herts Transport Vision 2050" so please respond to that. Highways England and the A1 Corridor Consortium have consulted on junction 6-junction 8 improvements.

Resident: The Frith has developments of houses costing over 1m. Why not have built more smaller houses?

Cllr Perkins: There are lots of affordable houses there already occupied.

Resident: There were six protected trees on that site which are not there now.

Resident: There is congestion in Knebworth now. With the proposed growth there will be more additional cars and it will be worse.

Cllr Perkins: I agree. Herts has the highest car ownership in the country.

Resident: We need to build a new town.

Entech representative: I would like to correct some contradicting information. There is a temporary TPO on the trees on the Entech site. We always intended keeping lots of the trees and we have been working closely with the Borough Council's tree officer. We are confident that 75 houses can be accommodated on the site and not 40-45. The Entech site has never been designated as employment land before; this is a new allocation in the Local Plan. Borough Councillors want the site to be kept for employment.

Parish Cllr Hall: 'If green belt boundaries can only be moved under 'exceptional circumstances' and Government policy states that housing need is not 'exceptional circumstances', on what basis is this site being proposed?

Cllr Cragg: We need sustainable jobs.

Parish Cllr Gribble: We don't need that amount of employment land.

Resident: We haven't got enough doctors surgeries.

Cllr Perkins: We are obliged to provide doctors surgeries. We were going to provide one on the Shredded Wheat site but the NHS didn't want it. The problem is there are not enough doctors.

Resident: Can't you request funds from the Government?

Cllr Perkins: Developments provide what's called s106 monies to provide for infrastructure. Health provision is up to the NHS.

Resident: Has anyone considered approaching the owners of Marshalls?

Cllr Perkins: That is designated employment land.

Marshalls site owner representative: Today the Parish Council were sent a proposal from the owners of the Marshalls site. When there is a break in the lease the site will be better used for housing. No car showroom will want that site; it is not suitable.

Parish Cllr Gribble: We don't need that site for employment.

Resident: The infrastructure is struggling now, with more residents it won't cope. The station will collapse, traffic in Knebworth will come to a halt, Stevenage will be chaos. There will be gridlock and we'll have to pay the price.

Resident: No Woolmer Green resident works here. We live here not work here. Woolmer Green won't attract business.

Cllr Perkins: If it gets so congested perhaps we should do something else and work locally.

Resident: I've lived here for 40 years and even if we vote against it, it will still go ahead. The Borough Councillors will build their houses and ignore residents. We had a pub here that was demolished when it could have been listed, to build 4 houses. They won't take any notice and in 10 years there will be a new town of Woolmer Green and Knebworth.

Cllr Markeiwicz: The odds are against you. If there is strength of feeling then form strong planning reasons. It is the duty of the Borough Council to produce a plan but it is open to challenge. If we don't have a plan there will be a free for all and we will have planning imposed on us. We will take your views back with us and put them forward on your behalf.

The plan does not meet the identified need but we have a long history of windfall delivery as evidence.

Resident: To have a plan with a convenience store is a no brainer.

Cllr Markeiwicz: There is employment growth in Welwyn Hatfield and it is an attractive place to live.

Cllr Perkins: The growth will be phased.

Resident: We must reiterate the same views and submit proper planning reasons. Get as many people as possible to comment. Log in to the consultation online.

Cllr Markeiwicz: Say why you don't need employment land.

Entech representative: The Entech site will provide employment.

Everyone was urged to respond to the consultation either online at:

www.welhat.gov.uk/localplan

or by filling in the appropriate form available from Welwyn Hatfield Council

Tel: 01707 357000 and ask for planning.

Council officers are on hand and are happy to provide help.

There is also information to help respond to the consultation on the Woolmer Green Parish Council web site:

www.woolmergreenpc.org.uk