

WIDFORD PARISH COUNCIL

Notes of Public Neighbourhood Plan Meeting Thursday 6th April 2017 held at 7.30pm in the Village Hall

PRESENT: Cllr Jill Buck, Chairman (JB); Cllr Carol Blackett (CB); Cllr Babs Edwards (BE); Cllr Paul Riddle (PR) Lorraine Hart (LH), Independent Consultant and Director of Community Land Use, London, and 17 members of the public.

Notes taken by Colin Marks, Clerk to the Parish Council

Apologies for absence had been received from Christopher Taylor-Young, Dr Ian Brett, Alan Kenny, Jo King, Tony Milton. Nigel Miller (NM) apologised that he would be arriving late.

The Parish Council Chairman opened the meeting at 7.30pm.

Cllr Jill Buck welcomed everyone and thanked them for attending, those who were at the previous meeting in January and gave an especial welcome to all newcomers. She said the following:

- This is NOT a Parish Council Meeting. The Council is just hosting this on behalf of the residents of the village.
- For the past three years, the Widford Council has been talking about and writing about Neighbourhood Plans, so it should be fairly familiar.
- Under the Localism Act of 2011, the then Government felt that it would help all Town and Parish Councils if they could be encouraged to contribute ideas for the future development their home area to the local District Plans.
- However, if you have studied the sample plans which Paul has put on the village web-site you will see that the areas in which a completed Neighbourhood Plan can comment on are quite circumspect and must conform in large measure to the District Plan, yet to be ratified.
- If at the end of the evening, and having had the opportunity to have heard and questioned our Independent Planning Consultant, the decision of the meeting is that they would wish to proceed further, can I remind you that a Neighbourhood Plan would not be run by the Parish Council, but would be lead by the residents of the Parish, with Parish Council input and grant aid.

There was no formal agenda; the meeting would be addressed by Lorraine Hart and comments and questions would be welcomed as we go along.

Lorraine Hart, Independent Consultant and Director of Community Land Use, London.

Lorraine explained that she is a member of the Royal Town Planning institute and has been engaged on a number of local and Neighbourhood Plans across the country, including being the consultant for the recently referendum-approved Buntingford Community Area Neighbourhood Plan (BCANP). She noted that East Herts Planners will now have to refer to the BCANP when considering planning applications within that area, together with the District Plan and the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).

Lorraine apologised for not being able to attend the January meeting due to heavy snow, which was regrettable because the intention of the meeting was to present views from two perspectives. She said that the presentation of East Herts' view made by Laura Pattison was both accurate and professional.

National planning policy presumes in favour of development. This creates tension when developers propose houses that are too expensive for locals and which don't meet their needs. Buntingford Town Council and Bishop's Stortford Town Council have both gained some ground on issues such as parking provision and therefore design, spaces between buildings, building height, etc, will be different from the national figures.

A Neighbourhood Plan can influence housing mix and, for example, the provision and design of footpaths that link green spaces to get a desired "feel". However, to be successful, such proposals must be very well supported by evidence.

Cost is a very big factor, even without a consultant. There is an enormous amount of work involved in the production of the four basic documents that comprise a Plan: A Map, the Plan itself, a Consultation Statement, and a Basic Condition Statement that must support Government policy and which must conform to the District Plan. All

of these must be supported by surveys, photographs, etc and they will take a lot of time and effort to create if the Plan is to have any chance of being approved. If the East Herts District Plan is made before the Neighbourhood Plan, then the District Plan will be the defining planning policy document. The District Plan is now going to the examiner in September.

Since development cannot be completely prevented, Lorraine said that, irrespective of a Neighbourhood Plan, the Parish Council and parishioners should insist on meeting developers when they submit an outline application and impress upon them that both the developer and the community can be helped in arriving at an acceptable proposition.

As far as a whether to produce a Neighbourhood Plan is concerned, this is ultimately down to parishioners since without broad and evidenced public support, a Plan will not be approved.

Q: Suppose the survey of residents doesn't comply with the East Herts District Plan?

LH: The Plan will be rejected, not by East Herts, but by the independent examiner, although he might agree to certain proposed policies *if* the evidence is *compelling*. LH said the production of a Design Code for the area would compel developers to comply with that in design terms. However, that would not necessarily mean fewer houses. It isn't that a specific number is foisted by central Government – the number has to be supported by evidence to produce a number of houses across the District that is looked at in terms of available land supply (SLAA).

The assessment of housing development needs includes the Strategic Housing Market Assessment requirement as set out in the NPPF. This requires local planning authorities to understand the housing needs in their area and to identify the scale and mix of housing that is likely to be needed to meet household and population projections. Planning authorities must also address the need for all types of housing, including affordable housing and the needs of different groups in the community, and to cater for housing demand and the scale of housing supply necessary to meet this demand. Also, under the NPPF, East Herts has a duty to co-operate on planning issues that cross administrative boundaries. Regarding the Gilston development, there would be even more pressure to develop than there is now.

LH commented: You really don't have a problem with development; what you have is a problem with house size, style, design etc.

PR: the village boundary is now being agreed in the District Plan to embrace Wilmoor (11 houses) and Martlets (18 houses). Proportionally, these two developments alone represent a massive expansion of the village, quite apart from smaller housing projects.

LH: A neighbourhood Plan can - and should – designate specific sites for development. The NPPF development policy will always have to be adhered to. Evidence can be submitted to the East Herts planning examiner re specific sites and proposals. She strongly encouraged councillors to talk to land owners, particularly about what their rumoured intentions are. In response to this, some doubt was expressed by parishioners as to whether they would get a straight answer. Responding to another comment, LH said that although developers and land owners should be consulted, they do not have to be involved as part of the Neighbourhood Plan team.

JB: Some sites on the SLAA are indicated as being available but designated as not suitable. There are big concerns that infrastructure issues, particularly those of sewage and water, are not being addressed by planners.

LH acknowledged that water services in East Herts, as in other parts of the South-East, present a very real problem.

In responding to another comment, LH said an agreed Neighbourhood Plan would not be subservient to the District Plan in terms of the weight given it when considering planning applications because they would both determine planning policy. A Neighbourhood Plan that focussed on a single issue would not succeed and could never be a means of preventing development (which she acknowledged Widford was not trying to do).

Q: What does affordable housing mean?

LH: It usually means priced at below the market value. However, in high-price areas, that's not very helpful. In the NPPF it means housing association houses, which are therefore only included in larger developments, in which case they become low-cost. A Neighbourhood Plan cannot stipulate specific house sizes, but could, if supported by strong evidence, determine a particular mix of housing to meet identified present and future needs. Gain, evidence is crucial to success.

Q: Is the validity of a Widford Plan less than the examples cited tonight, ie Buntingford, Bishop's Stortford, Woodcote?

LH: Planning is about *impact* on the village. So, a Plan can determine what will fit into the existing environment. A

Plan cannot be just about development issues – that suggests being inward looking. It must be about looking at the future – what the community wants to create and also what it wants to protect.

Q: As Buntingford combined its Plan with satellite villages, could Widford combine with neighbouring villages?

JB: In theory, yes, but Hunsdon is fully engaged with Gilston, and Wareside with issues of Ware North.

LH: The temperature of the room seems to be that producing a Neighbourhood Plan for Widford would not be worthwhile. She said to look at the emerging District Plan, the old Parish Plan of five or so years ago, and look at other Plans to see what policies could be usefully included and formed into a Widford Plan. LH also strongly advocated lobbying planners over infrastructure, doctors, schools etc.

NM called for a show of hands on a straightforward basis of whether to proceed, yes or no.

The ensuing show of hands resulted in 5 members of the public wishing to take the possibility of a Plan a stage further.

LH determined that 5 out of 17 in favour broadly reflected the vote of the January meeting when 8 out of 30 wanted to look further. She therefore concluded that by a significant majority, the meeting rejected proceeding with the production of a Neighbourhood Plan.

The Chairman thanked everyone for attending, invited all to stay for tea or coffee and biscuits, and closed the meeting at 9.15pm.