

East Herts Council District Plan 2011 – 2033

Hearing Statement - Input by Mr N J Griffiths

Focus on the proposal to build 600 homes on land to the East of Gresley Way, Stevenage.

I am unable to attend the hearing session planned for 9th November, due to a previous appointment in Yorkshire. In my online response to the East Herts Council District Plan I confirmed that I wished to participate in the oral examination. Naturally I am very disappointed at not being able to do so and submit this statement in my absence.

Personal Background – I am not a resident within Aston Parish but reside on the Chells Manor Estate. I have lived and mostly worked in Stevenage since 1959, having moved from London with my parents. My wife and I have lived on and moved within the Chells Manor Estate since 1988, being one of the first residents, and we have seen it grow to its present size.

Opening Statement – This same parcel of land was subject to a planning application by Leach Homes (LH) and Moody Homes (MH) in May 1988. Planning application 2/190/88 to Stevenage Borough Council (SBC) was for, I believe, 2 access roads onto the site. Planning application 3/0685/880P to East Herts District Council (EHDC) was for the proposed housing development.

Both SBC and EHDC refused the planning applications (see appendix 1 for EHDC decision letter dated 14/9/88). In January 1989 LH submitted an appeal to the Secretary of State for the Environment in respect of the site (see appendix 2).

An inspector - B H Smith DIPTP MRTPI PINS carried out a site inspection and submitted a report to the Secretary of State for the Environment, The Right Honourable Chris Patten MP with the recommendation that the appeal be dismissed (see appendix 3). This was communicated to the appellant in a letter dated 30/10/89 signed by R A Sanderson on behalf of the Secretary of State (see appendix 4).

Given the reasons EHDC refused the original planning application in 1988 (contained in appendix 1) – **1.** Green belt encroachment, **2.** Visual amenity and **3.** Traffic generation I find it unacceptable that EHDC now wish to incorporate exactly the same site into their district plan given that both **1** and **2** above are no different now than they were then and **3** is considerably worse since the building of the Great Ashby Estate to the north and residential housing on large areas of the Pin Green Industrial Area.

The very clear report compiled by B H Smith addressed all of the concerns the then residents of Chells Manor raised at that time. They are no different now to what they were then.

The argument that this green belt land should be sacrificed for housing less than 30 years after it was emphatically turned down does not hold water. Adjoining land owners to this site have already indicated their willingness for their land to be built upon so if approved there will be very little stopping the spread of housing to the east, enveloping Aston End and on towards Aston itself.

Additional Factors - There are a number of additional reasons why this development should be struck out which I detail below.

- Topography -The area under consideration has a 65 feet slope from one end of the site to the other and down towards the River Beane Valley. The River Beane is one of the very few chalk streams within the UK. Therefore, it is incorrect to state that the development would not be viewable. In fact the inspection by B H Smith clearly stated that "Much of the proposed housing on this exposed valley side would be visible from a wide area including the village of Walkern". The earth bund to the east of Gresley Way now forms a clearly defined break between the Town of Stevenage and the countryside. If this bund is breached in the three places proposed then there will no longer be a clear delineation. Houses will be viewable from both Chells Manor as well as Walkern/Aston End. Pigeon Land have acknowledged that in parts of the south east and north east of the proposed development the vegetation is "slightly less robust" and enhanced tree cover will be planted. Planting trees would not shield the development as they would require at least 30 – 40 years to mature to any reasonable height and for a good 4 months of the year they have no leaves on them.
- Traffic Congestion - Gresley Way is an undulating road with a speed limit of 40 mph, which is busy most of the day. During the morning and evening rush hours the road has a continual stream of cars in both directions. To put three roundabouts along this stretch will cause considerable congestion to an already overloaded road network. Add to this the considerable number of vehicular movements from 600 homes and vehicle movements to and from the primary school, care home, shops and community/health will prove to be a major problem on Gresley Way from which there is no possibility of relief (e.g. conversion to dual carriageway). Further afield the extra vehicle movements will impact on the A602 towards Ware/Hertford, both Fairlands Way and Six Hills Way towards the Gunnels Wood Industrial Area and A1(M), Fairlands Way/Martins Way towards the A1(M) and Hitchin or Letchworth and to/from the Pin Green Industrial Area and Great Ashby. For those going south towards the A602 it is highly likely that this will lead to an increase in 'rat runs' through Walkern and onto Benington and Aston End/Aston to Bragbury End. With regard to Bragbury End I understand that within Stevenage Borough Council's District Plan there are plans to build 550 houses on land either side of the A602 with a minimum of at least one roundabout leading onto this main arterial road. This will add to the log jam of cars which even now back up along the A602 and Gresley Way.
- Public Transport - A bus journey by SB1 from the end of The White Way to the Railway Station is currently scheduled to take 20 minutes, and to southern end of Gunnels Wood Industrial Area 27 minutes (Arriva Bus Timetable). Should the development proceed any diversion of the bus route through the development will add time to these journeys as well as creating traffic problems at the entrance and exit to the site. Realistically I cannot see someone being prepared to spend getting on towards an hour a day commuting by bus from one side of Stevenage to the other when they could walk out their front door and get into their own private space in a car even if it adds to the traffic congestion. I would fully expect most journeys to/from the site would be by car. In my opinion the congestion and safety hazards for motorists would increase considerably and cannot be justified.

- Cycle Path - Pigeon Land Ltd have said in their Delivery Statement that the site is well connected by an existing footpath and cycle network. This is totally incorrect. Through the short sightedness of EHDC planning application process, when the Chells Manor Estate was planned there were no provision for cycle paths made. Note Chells Manor Estate was in EHDC area and subject to their planning rules and was only passed to Stevenage Borough Council responsibility a number of years later. There are no cycle paths nearby - the nearest access at the indicated northern cycle link on the Pigeon's Concept Masterplan, to the Stevenage Cycle Network is at the Emperors Head Shops, a distance of just under 0.4 mile from the developers indicated link. This would require the crossing of Gresley Way, which undulates, with the associated dangers of crossing a road with a 40 mph speed limit and no possibility of building an underpass or a bridge due to land constrictions. Once an individual manages to get safely across Gresley Way there would then be the necessity to navigate, on road, through Boxfield Green, across The White Way and then Fairlands Way before reaching the one and only cycle path coming into Chells Manor. The southern cycle link as indicated on the Concept Masterplan exits straight onto Gresley Way! Again, the nearest cycle path to be found is at the junction of Six Hills Way and Chells Way. In summary, Pigeon Land Ltd have been very vague in respect of the safe connectivity of this development to both the road, pedestrian, bus and cycle network. I contend that it will prove to be an unsurmountable problem which would end up in creating severe bottlenecks and dangerous crossings at the proposed three vehicle, one pedestrian and two cycle entrances to the site.
- Primary school, care home and local centre - Pigeon Land Ltd have indicated that a primary school and care home plus local centre would be built. Based on my own experience, having moved onto the Chells Manor Estate in 1988 I have very serious doubts if any these will materialise. A school was to have been built on the Chells Manor Estate (which at that time came under EHDC planning control) but was conveniently converted into housing. The Emperors Head shops and Community Centre were eventually built a number of years after originally promised, following a lot of pressure from the residents. At these shops the newsagent/post office/convenience store serves the whole of Chells Manor - a much larger number of homes than the proposed development. I cannot envisage a local centre being able to survive on the income from a 'self-contained development' of 600 homes which seems to be one of the developers' mantras. Therefore, the developers would inevitably come back with plans to build yet more housing and thereby adding to the very real problems associated with building on this land in the first place.
- Secondary Education - It has been stated (12.2.3 EHDC Pre-Submission District Plan Consultation 2016) that secondary education would be provided at a new school on what is currently identified as the Barnwell East site (formerly Collenswood School). This site has not been identified in Pigeon's Delivery Statement. The route to this school site would involve a large number of safety related concerns. Children would have to initially cross Gresley Way and having done so walk or ride some 1.5 miles from the junction of The White Way and Gresley Way(chosen as the mid-point of the development along Gresley Way) via a tortuous route of initially walking or cycling on footpaths beside Gresley Way then Six Hills Way, (currently there are no cycle paths on Gresley Way or Six Hills Way), before picking up the cycle path network at Chells Way, Barham Road, Gresley Way

(Poplars Estate) before cutting through the Poplars Estate to the entrance of the site in Redwing Close.

I contend that faced with this:-

(a) Children would be taken by their parents or carers to and from school by car, so once again, exacerbating the number of vehicle movements along Gresley Way, or

(b) Children will be faced with very real dangers in crossing roads or being forced to ride cycles on footpaths near to very busy roads.

- Employment - The Employment Data Reports produced by Regeneris Consulting and DTZ referred to in paragraph 1.3.1 of the District Plan are a minimum of 4 years out of date, during which time Stevenage has become firmly established as a commuter town for London or other destinations.

This can be demonstrated by:-

(a) The long queues of traffic which line up waiting to get onto the A1(M) at both junctions 7 and 8 together with the backing up of traffic on the feeder roads to both junctions

(b) The development of a large number of apartments in and around the Town Centre in what were formerly large office blocks. There are a considerable number of brownfield sites within the town which remain empty as Stevenage Borough Council have been singularly unsuccessful in attracting new employment opportunities to the town. Of the current larger employers in Stevenage - MBDA, Airbus, GSK and Fujitsu, MBDA used to employ some 7000 staff on their site (I know because I used to work in the HR Department there) but now employs considerably less than half that number. I believe Airbus and GSK probably employ the same number that they have for many years and Fujitsu have recently announced 1800 UK job reductions. Therefore, this development will not meet a need for housing for any Stevenage based employment but will add to the considerable problems of commuting by train or car towards London/other destinations. The former Dixons warehouse on the Pin Green Industrial Site is now a housing estate and the former DuPont Site on the same industrial site has recently been demolished and houses will be built instead.

- Financial Model – I am not privy to any financial data relating to this development but as I have already alluded to I am not convinced that a development of some 600 houses, up to 240 of which are designated as affordable dwellings would be able to financially support the building of a primary school, new local centre, community building and primary health care centre. I assume that the care home would be privately funded? In addition “public open space and strategic landscaping” is also detailed in the Pigeon Land proposal. Where will the finance for all of this come from? I suspect that the land designated for most if not all of these will be conveniently converted into housing as we experienced less than 30 years ago.

Closing Statement – The statement that this development would be deliverable within a short period of time is clearly incorrect as none of the infrastructure contained within EHDC District Plan, and which lies within Stevenage Borough Council's boundary currently exists. Any new infrastructure and schooling provision would have to be funded from where??

Our Member of Parliament, Stephen McPartland has recently written an open letter (see appendix 5) condemning the proposed development. In addition all three Stevenage Borough Councillors for the Manor Ward (Messrs Parker, Snell and McGuiness) are similarly opposed to this development.

In my direct experience, EHDC track record on both planning and deliverability has been very poor. They appear to have seized with both hands an opportunistic developer's proposal to build on green belt despite this being turned down less than 30 years ago. Surely local democracy should be taken into account when such important decisions affecting local people, the green belt, and the beauty and river environment of the Beane Valley are being taken.

N J Griffiths

16 October 2017

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – East Herts District Council document dated 14 September 1988. Notification to Leach Homes of planning application refusal.

Appendix 2 – East Herts District Council letter dated 23 January 1989. Notification of appeal to the Secretary of State in respect of planning permission refusal.

Appendix 3 – Report by B H Smith DIPTP MRTPI PINS, undated, to Right Honourable Chris Patten MP Secretary of State for the Environment.

Appendix 4 – Departments of the Environment and Transport letter dated 30 October 1989. Notification to Leach Homes that planning appeal had been unsuccessful.

Appendix 5 – Stephen McPartland MP Open letter dated September. Open letter detailing opposition to Gresley Park development.