

## **East Herts Council District Plan 2011 – 2033**

### **Matters and Issues - Input by Aston Parish Council**

#### **Focus on the proposal to build 600 homes at Gresley Park (aka East of Stevenage) on Aston Parish land**

Aston Parish Council (APC) originally input to the EHC District Plan via the EHC web site automated response. However, we found this form of input constraining, so we sent a separate letter, by e-mail to enable us to make some key points. This letter was 17 pages including detailed appendices. This paper summarises the APC inputs (in 3 ½ pages) and formats them under the issue headings provided by the Inspector, as the basis for conducting the independent review. We hope this is helpful

#### **1. General Matters**

- a. The proposal to build 600 houses on Gresley Park (GP), East of Stevenage, was added very late in the planning process, as a result of late identification of problems relating to the number of dwellings proposed to be built near the A414 by Herts Highways by 3 local authorities, presenting EHC with a substantial problem
- b. This site had been promoted by Stevenage Borough Council (SBC) to East Herts Council (EHC) during their Duty to Cooperate meetings but had been declined
- c. A developer was in contact with both East Herts Council (EHC) and, as soon as this problem was identified, and proposed the development on Gresley Park (aka East of Stevenage).
- d. At the time EHC were very pressed for both time and resource. EHC accepted this windfall and we believe invested very little resource and time in exploring alternatives
- e. Certainly, none of the four strategic options evaluated by EHC's consultants Aecom in the Sustainability Assessment contained an alternative to GP
- f. In addition, through our local District Councillor at the time, Mr Tony Jackson, we asked EHC what options had been considered as an alternative to GP. There was no reply to this question.
- g. As a result, we conclude that no alternative to GP was evaluated and therefore the EHC Plan was not comprehensively evaluated in this respect
- h. EHC rejected East of Stevenage earlier in the planning process (see reasons listed under 5 below)
- i. In practical terms, GP means that the boundary of Stevenage will be moved significantly east beyond the very effective existing boundary established at Gresley Way
- j. The proposed development at GP is on high quality Green Belt, rated by the EHC's own consultants as of "paramount importance" to "check the unrestricted sprawl of large built up areas" and "to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment"
- k. The site is situated on the top and western slope of the Beane Valley, a precious chalk stream valley noted for its tranquillity and wild life. The development will be visible from many parts of the valley particularly at night, because of its commanding position on the top of the valley

#### **2. The Development Strategy – Housing - Spatial distribution/supply**

- a. The development of 600 houses in GP is unlikely to meet the requirements of housing needs of East Herts in a sustainable way. The only practical journeys from GP to East Herts locations will be by car on the already congested A602

(evaluated in the HCC Transport Plan as the most congested east-west route across the County). It is likely that GP residents will have a Stevenage orientation and will be predominantly travelling west

- b. GP, in practical terms, is therefore an extension of Stevenage and will use Stevenage infrastructure and travel routes
- c. (We note that in their reply to the Inspector's questions EHC has confirmed that their intention is for the accommodation to solely meet East Herts needs.)

### 3. The Development Strategy: Housing Development in the Villages

- a. The GP site is in the Parish of Aston, an ancient village with currently some 370 houses and 900 residents. The proposed development will more than double the size of the Parish
- b. It will also open up possibilities for other developments east of Gresley Way (local land owners have already been promoting such options)
- c. Over time this will inevitably mean that Aston will be enveloped and will eventually become part of Stevenage
- d. There were substantial transfers of land from Aston to Stevenage in the 1980s, so Aston has borne its share of planning pain

### 4. The Development Strategy – Infrastructure

- a. The proposed development is on the east of Gresley Way which is a very heavily used by-pass round the east of Stevenage. It is single carriageway and currently has a 40mph speed limit, and has had significant safety problems. Safety was one of the reasons why the Inspector rejected the earlier application for this site and at that time the speed limit was 30mph and there was considerably less traffic
- b. It is proposed to build a school in GP (although a similar proposal when Chells Manor was built was never fulfilled). Children from Stevenage therefore will need to cross Gresley Way – younger children going to the school in GP and older children going to secondary schools in Stevenage
- c. There is currently no safe crossing of Gresley Way in the vicinity. The GP proposal include 2 or 3 roundabouts but there are no proposals for safe pedestrian crossings
- d. There are no cycle routes in Chells Manor that GP will be able to connect to so GP will be quite isolated
- e. GP will add significantly to the traffic flows along Gresley Way and the A602 and the Transport Assessment paper identifies the need for a smart round-about signalling system at the A602/Gresley Way junction, but nothing much else
- f. Most of the above will make worse existing congestion and no plausible alleviation has been proposed

### 5. The Development Strategy - Green Belt

- a. Proposals to build houses and wind turbines on the top of the flanks of the Beane Valley has been turned down by 3 independent inspectors on appeal. This included a proposal in the 1980s to build on the same site as GP
- b. East of Stevenage was also rejected earlier in this EHC District Plan planning process reasons outlined in 1.i). above
- c. We understand that building on Green Belt can only be justified in "exceptional circumstances". Such exceptional circumstances have not been made clear in the EHC DP, and we are given to understand that housing need alone is not enough or "exceptional"
- d. The description of the site in several of the EHC documents is misleading. It is not on a plateau with a substantial ridge, and it is not screened from the Beane

- valley. It is on a dome and will be very visible in distant views in the Beane valley, from parts of Walkern, Benington and Datchworth, and particularly at night
- e. The development breaches the well-established eastern boundary of Stevenage at Gresley Way, where a substantial bund and trees were established to very successfully screen Stevenage developments from the Beane Valley in the 1980s
  - f. If GP is approved, other proposals for development east of Gresley Way have already been mooted and more will be forthcoming. If Gresley Way is breached it will be only a matter of time before more development takes place east of Gresley Way, enveloping the ancient villages of Aston and Aston End, which will then inevitably become a part of Stevenage
  - g. Independent inspectors' comments on a development of the same site as Gresley Park and for wind turbines on the top of the flanks of the Beane Valley said:
    - i. *"Development on the scale envisaged would result in a large and prominent wedge of building spilling out from Stevenage and intruding into.....the Green Belt to the detriment of its open character."*
    - ii. *"Much of the proposed housing on this exposed valley side would be visible from a wide area including the village of Walkern; for I think it extremely unlikely that reinforced planting of the existing hedgerows would screen the whole site. .....the proposed development would impinge on the fine landscape of the valley and would mean the loss of an area of countryside that provides visual amenity and is in my opinion worthy of protection for its own sake."*
    - iii. *It is remarkable how well screened the large town of Stevenage is by landform and trees although it is only some 3 kms to the west. Together with the sharply defined boundary to the town, and absence of any significant urban fringe, this gives the rural area a seemingly remote and restful quality that belies its real proximity to an extensive urban area. In my view this is a valuable local characteristic that would be harmed by the scale, intrusion and motion of the turbines, a consideration that adds further to objections to them on visual and landscape character grounds."*
6. Other - we also have more general concerns about EHC strategies for use of Green Belt and for concentrating future development around existing urban centres which already have inadequate infrastructure.