

WOOLMER GREEN PARISH COUNCIL

Minutes of Public Meeting on Tuesday 4th June 2019

In attendance:

Borough Councillors Steve Markiewicz & Roger Trigg
Parish Councillors Andy Gribble, Chairman, Phil Corke, Vice Chairman, Sarah Hall, Rob Horton & Grant Pinney.
Parish Clerk, Janet Pearce.

Councillor Andy Gribble, Chairman

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting. He said the Parish Council last had a public meeting back in 2016 to discuss the Local Plan consultation where 150 houses were proposed at site HS15 to the rear of Marshalls.

The Local Plan was submitted for examination by a Government planning inspector in May 2017 and Hearing Sessions have been ongoing. The Plan has been assessed as being 4,000 short of housing need for the Borough which has prompted a "call for sites".

Since the Local Plan's submission the Entech site has been granted permission on appeal to build 72 dwellings along with shops and offices. The Parish Council considered that 150 dwellings were too many but with the new sites promoted, including the Heath Road site, WGr7 & 7a, in Welwyn there is potential for approximately 440, a 74% increase in Woolmer Green.

The Parish Council's position has always been that there is sufficient brownfield land available and developing Green Belt is not necessary.

Development in the surrounding areas also needs to be taken into account; Stevenage 7,600, Codicote 364, Knebworth over 600, Welwyn 98 with further potential for 820 and Digswell a potential for 347. What will be the impact of all of this extra housing on local infrastructure?

It is important that everyone expresses their views by submitting comments to the Call for Sites consultation. The deadline is 18th June.

Questions

Resident: What is the power of our voices?

Chairman: The sites in the consultation are proposed sites. The Borough will consider all the comments before deciding which sites to take forward.

Cllr Markiewicz: It's good to see you all here. The Borough has a duty to produce a Local Plan. The reason that the Entech development was approved is because the Borough could not demonstrate it has a 5 year land supply for housing. Now any developer can use this as a reason in their appeal process. Worst still if we don't have a Local Plan it gives developers the opportunity to appeal to the Secretary of State to say any site is suitable; we would lose control of the planning process. Originally in the Local Plan we were relying on a history of acquiring 100 houses per year as windfall; Entech and Marshalls are windfall sites; but the planning inspector

did not accept this so we have to find a further 4,000 houses by looking again at the Green Belt.

Resident: Are you saying Entech & Marshalls are windfall sites? If so why put more development in such a small part of the Borough when Entech & Marshalls will provide enough housing.

Cllr Markiewicz: The land behind Marshalls (HS15) is in the plan as it was considered suitable for development due to moderate harm to the Green Belt and would provide the target growth for villages of between 20% & 30% maximum.

Resident: But now things have changed.

Cllr Markiewicz: I cannot see that HS15 can be pulled out as it's gone through the process which has been applied fairly across the Borough. It is a concern.

Resident: Will infrastructure be in place before development takes place? The B197 will be gridlocked. You have to do the basics first.

Cllr Markiewicz: Absolutely right. The B197 is critical.

Resident: As well as the busy road does the plan include schools, surgeries, shops that can cope? Where do we send children to school?

Cllr Trigg: What's been put forward will not all get through. Send your comments in. The larger developments will not get approved until there is infrastructure to facilitate it. Also it is a 20 year plan.

Resident: Knebworth station is under strain as well as the B197.

Cllr Markiewicz: The road is a real problem. Cllr Richard Smith and the Parish Council are attempting to introduce traffic calming and lower the speed limit on the B197. We think the road structure is an inhibitor to housing growth.

Resident: is there data available on traffic, schools etc. Can the Parish Council access data as that would make our arguments more powerful.

Resident: I agree, we are commenting in a general manner. Data should be made available.

Resident: The inspector is imposing recommendations but it seems very convenient to have grey areas. Data should be in the public domain. If we can put it into our argument it will make our representation stronger but it seems the discussion is kept narrow. No one has talked about pollution and its effect on health.

Chairman: Agreed to ask Cllr Richard Smith.

Cllr Trigg: The plan is outline planning only; it does not mean there is infrastructure for it. Detailed planning will not be granted until necessary infrastructure is in place. Smaller sites may come forward before infrastructure but the larger sites will have to have detailed planning.

Resident: Several small sites are being proposed in Woolmer Green and it's not being done holistically. The three sites that could go forward in Woolmer Green are all on the same road and there will not be the infrastructure for it.

Cllr Trigg: Service organisations will produce detailed recommendations on what is needed. If the capacity is insufficient then development will be delayed until it can be addressed.

Cllr Markiewicz: One of our concerns about County Hall is that when we highlight traffic issues on planning applications Highways does not raise any objection. The same applies to other authorities where I have been very concerned. We have to accept they are the experts.

Resident: There are two schools on the B197 and a petition to request a reduction in the speed on the road was rejected.

Cllr Markiewicz: The issue of the B197 is being pursued by County Councillor Richard Smith and is supported by Woolmer Green and Welwyn Parish Councils. It is a primary objective however long it takes. This was discussed at the Annual Parish Meeting so please attend these and we'd love to see you at our bi-monthly surgeries to hear your views then we can properly represent you.

Resident: Knebworth Parish Council will be submitting comments to the consultation. A lot of people in Knebworth are not aware of the consultation but an information leaflet has gone round so many Knebworth residents will be commenting.

Resident: We have mentioned obtaining facts but does sending in the same comment count as one objection.

Cllr Markiewicz: If the wording in the comments is identical it will be counted as one objection. Write your representation in your own words, do not copy and paste and each will be a valid objection.

Welwyn Cllr Castle: One source of information is the Borough's Green Belt Study which is on the Borough's website.

Resident: Development at WGr7/7a will negatively impact the wildlife in the Nature Reserve.

Cllr Mickiewicz: Absolutely.

Cllr Markiewicz: Can we assume you are all here because you think there is a danger this village will be overdeveloped? (All agreed.) We will make this representation on your behalf to the Borough and County Councils.

Resident: I am a resident of The Drive and am concerned that traffic will not go over the narrow bridge in Heath Road but will use The Drive as a cut through. It is a private un-adopted road and it is also a concern that a developer will adopt it and make it the main access. They could even create an access across the Heath.

Cllr Trigg: That will all have to be assessed. I personally think WGr7/7a are non-starters.

Resident: We have already mentioned the Nature Reserve, is it protected? Could Heath Road be widened?

Cllr Markiewicz: Highlighting harm to the Nature Reserve is a valid planning issue.

Resident: To widen the bridge over the railway would be a difficult feat.

Resident: Heath Road is very narrow and is dangerous in icy weather. People drive too fast; it can't support more traffic.

Cllr Trigg: Please ensure you comment on each site separately. Sites WGr7 and WGr 7a are two separate sites.

Resident: What provision is there for older people who do not use the internet to voice their opinion?

Cllr Markiewicz: Fill in the forms and hand them to the Parish Council then we will collect them and hand them in.

Chairman: Forms can be obtained from the Clerk.

Resident: When will we hear the results of the consultation? It was a complete shock to get the leaflet.

Cllr Trigg: The consultation ends on 18th June and a report will be published in September. The Cabinet Parking & Planning Panel (CPPP) will then make decisions based on recommendations in the report (CPPP meetings are open to the public to attend and not streamed as stated at the meeting). The Parish Council will keep you informed of progress. It is hoped the Plan will be adopted in early 2020.

Resident: Is our MP aware of this?

Chairman: We contacted Grant Shapps a couple of years ago when HS15 was proposed and he backed out views on developing brownfield first.

Cllr Trigg: The North Herts MP called in their Local Plan but was overridden.

Cllr Markiewicz: He is aware but he is one voice. He has no more influence than any of us.

Resident: 4 or 5 new towns would cause less disruption.

Resident: How will we be informed of progress?

Woolmer Green Cllr Pinney: We will put updates in our newsletter but you can contact a councillor or the Clerk at any time.

Cllr Trigg: The Borough email out a newsletter which you can sign up for. (contact: localplan@welhat.gov.uk Tel: 01707 357532).

Welwyn Cllr Castle: Welwyn Parish Council is preparing comments for the consultation so if anyone has any useful information that we could use, like the issue with The Drive, please forward it to us. (cllr.m.castle@welwynpc.org.uk)

Resident: Is it likely more houses will be built in the village besides the 72 at Entech?

Chairman: I think we will have more but our preference is for Entech and Marshalls to be developed and not the Green Belt.

Cllr Markiewicz: With regard to Entech, I can understand the argument that developing Entech and Marshalls would fulfil Woolmer Green's quota without

resorting to Green Belt but the site behind Marshalls has already gone through the process, and I can't see it being withdrawn.

Cllr Trigg: On the positive side there will be 30% affordable homes with any new development. Some will be shared ownership, some at 80% market value and some council rented homes. They are more viable on Green Belt sites so the percentage can be more like 40%.

Resident: Have the Borough complied with their duty to co-operate?

Cllr Markiewicz: Yes it is a requirement for different authorities to work together and it is included in the Local Plan documents. This is important because of the 600 houses in Knebworth that will impact the road in Woolmer Green.

Woolmer Green Cllr Pinney: Woolmer Green Parish Council has also worked with Knebworth and Welwyn Parish Councils.

Chairman: The same consultant represents Knebworth and Woolmer Green at the inspection Hearings.

Resident: With a proportion of houses being built on Green Belt land, does that not set a precedent for further Green Belt development?

Cllr Markiewicz: The areas of Green Belt selected for development are taken out of the Green Belt through the Local Plan. Remaining Green Belt will still be protected.

Welwyn Cllr Castle: Green Belt boundaries can only be redrawn through a Local Plan. Having strong defensible boundaries like a motorway or Nature Reserve is important to the planning inspector so that development cannot spread further.

Cllr Markiewicz: One of the prime considerations of Green Belt policy is to prevent coalescence, to prevent settlements merging into one another.

Woolmer Green Cllr Corke: Please could everyone spread the word. Encourage people to respond to the consultation so we can do all what we can to stop this.

Cllr Markiewicz: The next Councillors Surgery is on 1st August. We'd be delighted to see as many of you as possible.