

EXTRAORDINARY MEETING of THE SOUTH WEST AREA PANEL held at ELSENHAM VILLAGE HALL at 7.20 pm on 2 OCTOBER 2007

Present:- Councillors D Jones – Chairman.
Councillors K Artus, E Abrahams, A Dean, C Dean, E Godwin, J Hudson, M Lemon, J Loughlin, D Morson, J Salmon, G Sell and L Wells.

Also present: Councillors C A Cant, R P Chambers, A J Ketteridge and County Councillor R Gooding.

Officers in attendance: G Bradley, R Harborough, S Hayden, J Mitchell and M T Purkiss.

SWAP13

LOCAL DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK – INTRODUCTION

Councillor D Jones, the Chairman of the Area Panel, welcomed over 200 members of the public to the meeting and introduced the panel members and officers. He said that he would allow the open question and answer session for the public and parish representatives to be extended and then asked the Director of Development to explain the background and progress with the Local Development Framework and the decision which had been taken at the Environment Committee to identify the option of locating 3,000 new homes in Elsenham as the preferred option of the Council.

The Director of Development then outlined the process and progress with policy choices and options for growth. He said that the total development required for the District was 9,672 dwellings and 5,466 were either built or were existing commitments. Therefore the Council needed to provide an additional 4,206 dwellings for the period up to 2024. He stressed that site specific decisions were not being made at this time and the decision made at the Environment Committee was part of an ongoing consultation exercise which could lead to a public inquiry in 2008.

The Chairman then invited questions from the public.

The first speaker asked why specific numbers had already been included when it was being said that site specific decisions had not been made. A member of the public then suggested that at the Environment Committee, Councillor Cheetham had said that the issue of development at Elsenham had been discussed at the South West Area Panel. He said that this was incorrect and had misled the Committee. He said that the area panel had asked for a workshop and he asked why this had not taken place. Councillor A Dean said that since March he had been asking for a public workshop with an informed discussion to take place. He said that there had been limited discussion at the Area Panel meeting, but this had not been an informed debate and he did not understand why this workshop had not taken place. In answer to a further question from Councillor Lemon the Chairman said that the meeting of the panel had been attended by 11 Councillors and approximately 40 members of the public, including parish and council representatives. Councillor Sell said that he understood that the Environment Committee did not want the workshop to take place. Councillor Morson then asked the Chairman why he

had refused to hold this meeting of the area panel when the level of public concern was evident. The Chairman said that when he received the request for a meeting of the panel he did not feel it was necessary as the matter had already been called in by the Scrutiny Committee.

A member of the public then asked why Councillors had chosen to ignore the options put forward by the professional officers and come up with their own proposal. Another member of the public said that in 1988 a Planning Inspector had refused an application for 350 houses in Elsenham due to insufficient foul water capacity and junctions not being able to cope with increased traffic. He said that no engineering work had been carried out on these junctions and the problems had got significantly worse.

A member of the public asked why the Council was saying no to Stansted, but saying yes to 3,000 homes in Elsenham which would ruin the countryside and were in an area where there was no infrastructure. Councillor Ketteridge was also asked whether he had any contact with either the developer or the site owner. He was also asked to explain the significance of the comments made by Paul Garland at the Environment Committee. Councillor Ketteridge confirmed that he had never, in any capacity, spoken or communicated with the developer or the site owner, other than receiving their circular communications, which had gone to all Members. He added that many developers had options on numerous sites within the District.

Councillor Ketteridge then made the following statement:

“It is clear from the letters and emails that have been circulating to councillors that a lot of mis-information has been disseminated and I hope to have the opportunity to put the record straight on most of those matters tonight.

First of all I would like to point out that we, Uttlesford Councillors and I suspect the majority of residents of Uttlesford do not want the Government imposed housing allocation, via its Regional Offices, that has been forced upon us. However, that is the situation that we find ourselves in. Uttlesford, it is decreed, must make provision for 9,290 homes between 2001 and 2024. Taking into account the number of dwellings already completed and unimplemented planning permission on urban settlement expansion sites the Council has to plan for a further 4,200 homes.

A number of people that have written to me have said that we should defy the Government and refuse to allocate sites for these homes. Our planning officers will tell you that such a course of action would result in an open house for planning applications from developers which even if refused by Uttlesford's Development Control Committee would certainly be lost on appeal because we had refused to construct a Local Development Framework.

In this respect the ideal for Uttlesford and many other Districts facing Government enforced housing growth is a change of Government. The Conservative party have decreed that they would abandon Labour's imposed housing targets and leave it to local councils to decide on their housing priorities. They would also abandon the Airport's White Paper and the Stansted Second Runway project or Stansted G2 as BAA prefer to call it. What a relief that would be to this District!

However, for the moment we have to address the reality of the situation. We have to undertake a statutory Local Plan process. During this process Uttlesford's Local Development Framework has been the subject of much discussion over many months. Consultations have been entered into via local newspapers, the Uttlesford District Council magazine "Uttlesford Life", Parish Councils and discussions at Area Panel meetings. This activity culminated in a report constructed by the Council's planning officers which formed part of the agenda for the Environment Committee that was held on Tuesday 4 September.

There was a very full report on progress thus far. This report recommended that four of the possible options should not be considered further. These were

- All development to take place in the villages
- All development to take place in the A120 corridor
- All development to take place in the West Anglia rail Corridor
- All development to take place in Saffron Walden or Great Dunmow or Stansted Mountfitchet

However, the report recommended that three options be considered further.

The Administration Group held a meeting on Wednesday 29 August 2007 to consider this report. This is normal practice particularly with an important subject matter. The Liberal Democrat Group held a similar meeting at 6.00 pm on the day of the Environment meeting.

Roger Harborough from the Planning Department attended that meeting to brief Administration members on the report and was present to answer queries from Members. He also attended the Lib Deb meeting for the same purpose.

During this discussion Members were very concerned about the dispersed options as it is well known that infrastructure such as primary schools and secondary schools in particular as well as GP surgeries, open spaces etc are already under great pressure in our District and thoughts turned to how these facilities could best be gained if we are to accommodate – albeit over a period of time this large number of new homes.

Questions to Roger Harborough about a single site option revealed that Government guidelines had changed and that now 5,000 homes was considered to be a viable settlement. Following a lot of questions from members Roger Harborough left the meeting and discussion and debate ensued and Members took account of the comments, by officers, in the report relating to option three "that a new settlement of 3,000 homes north east of Elsenham would make a new secondary school viable". The report also stated that "Development to the north east of Elsenham would need to include a mixed use centre to form in the long term the heart of the new community". I mention these latter points merely to put to rest the claim that the fourth option as proposed was somehow plucked out of the air.

This was a serious debate about what options should go forward for further discussion and it was decided that subject to discussion with our officers a

fourth option would be proposed for a single site of 3,000 new homes north east of Elsenham which would enable an eco community with a planned mix of type and tenure of dwellings and which we would ensure the provision of all the necessary infrastructure would form part of the planning process learning from mistakes of the past.

The Chairman of the Environment Committee, Councillor Barker, subsequently discussed this possible fourth option with our planning officers and meeting with no objection we proceeded. It was agreed that Roger Harborough would inform the Liberal Democrat Group of our intention at their group meeting.

At the Environment Committee Paul Garland of the Uttlesford Futures Environment Group and Sustainable Uttlesford addressed the meeting at its commencement. In quoting from the minutes of that meeting he said that opportunity should be taken to promote sustainable solutions to growth and that the preferred option should meet the following criteria

- 1 Reduce the need to travel
 - 2 Need for access to high transport links
 - 3 Low carbon, water efficient built environment
 - 4 A mixed use development with a large proportion of low cost housing.
- He concluded that the development should provide the opportunity for secondary education and should be a mixed use compact development taking advantage of the latest eco settlement initiatives.

These matters were all in accord with the discussions we had held.

Although I am not personally a member of the Environment Committee I attended the meeting to propose, in my capacity as Leader of the Council, that the three options put forward in the report together with a fourth and preferred option of 3,000 homes as in a new settlement north east of Elsenham with 750 homes in the larger towns and the remainder to be dispersed in villages, go forward for further consultation. In doing so I outlined the reasons and the thinking behind the proposal.

An amendment was put forward at the meeting worded as follows “to approve the three growth options as outlined in the paper and that a new settlement be looked at within the district”. This amendment, on being put to the vote, was lost on the casting vote of the chairman of that committee.

At this point I have to say that contrary to much mis-information nothing is yet decided, there is much further work to be done by our officers on all four options and we are open to further suggestions and possible further options in the consultation period to come. There is no closed mind on this.

Many people have commented on the unsuitability of roads in the area of option four and indeed in other areas. The report to the Environment Committee makes it quite clear that further infrastructure planning work and highways impact assessment will need to be done on the options to be taken forward to the next stage. I have already said nothing is as yet decided and this investigative work will now commence in respect of all four options. When I have finished my statement I would like to ask Roger Harborough to say a

few words about how and if the fourth option, would affect Henham and Ugley from which I have also received a number of representations.

Others that have written to me have said that the option selected was taken undemocratically – I can assure you that nothing is further from the truth and I hope that the process I have outlined demonstrates that.

These are difficult choices – adoption of any one of the three options set out in the report would have created considerable controversy. Dunmow have already stated on record that further housing development there would be resisted and option two or three would I feel sure have still provoked considerable disquiet in Elsenham had either been selected as a preferred option.

There have been suggestions by Liberal Democrats that Elsenham was chosen because it has Liberal Democrat Councillors. What nonsense – are they suggesting that the Council's paid officers also had this in mind when constructing their report?

As a result of irresponsible statements in Liberal Democrat press releases and leaflets delivered in the area I will conclude by saying this – the Conservative Group on Uttlesford District Council have never wavered in its outright opposition to a second runway at Stansted airport.”

Members of the public then referred to a letter which had been circulated by the Fairfield Partnership, the potential developers, stating that they were encouraged that the land under their control had been chosen by Uttlesford as the preferred option. The letter also said that Fairfield had made representations to the East of England Plan. The letter had been copied to officers and it was asked what response had been made. A resident also said that drawings had been found at Elsenham Station two years ago with detailed development plans shown. The Chairman said that Councillors had no knowledge of this matter.

A member of the public then questioned why one political party wanted to turn this development proposal into a political matter. Another member of the public said that all of the proposals were dependent on the expansion of Stansted Airport and he felt that decisions on housing were premature until decisions on Stansted were known. He considered that the Council had a special case to put to Government to delay housing until after these decisions were made. He also queried the statement in the Environment Committee minutes that the Council “recognises the growth of Stansted Airport”. Councillor Ketteridge conceded that the airport was a difficult issue. He said that the LDF had to recognise the growth at Stansted Airport as there was a White Paper and the statement in the Environment Committee minutes was the least which the Council could say. He said that it was not possible to ignore the airport issue and whilst Members would have wished to avoid the housing growth proposed, there was no option.

A member of the public questioned, why, if the process was at an early stage, options had been narrowed down to only four. She said that Elsenham could not cope with more development and suggested that a new settlement off the new A120 would be preferable. A further question related to why the Council

had excluded the option of development spread across the district which would result in Elsenham only having an additional 318 dwellings. Another member of the public said that the concern of people was evident as many people had been turned away from this meeting. He said that the road situation out of Elsenham was full of bottlenecks and was unable to cope with increased traffic. He suggested that all Councillors should spend a day in Stansted seeing the traffic problems before any permanent decisions were made.

Councillor Loughlin said that she was a member of the LDF Working Group which had met since 2006. She said that this group had felt that option 2 provided the most viable way forward and at no time was option 4 discussed. She felt that the decision of the Environment Committee was unacceptable and hoped that Councillors would take notice of the views of the public.

Councillor C Dean said that the concept of an eco town was a good one. However, the Government's criteria for this was a minimum of 5,000 dwellings. She said that the Leader of the Council had said that he was open to all suggestions, but at the Environment Committee he would not agree to look at other sites. She asked on what basis Elsenham had been chosen as the preferred option. Councillor Ketteridge replied that both options 2 and 3 included development at Elsenham, but option 4 had the advantage of making a new secondary school viable. He stressed that no decisions had been made at this time.

The Head of Housing and Planning Policy then responded to some of the questions which had been raised earlier in the meeting.

He said that traffic and effect on historic settlement character were the potential key issues to be considered in relation to impacts on Henham and Ugley; the Council had set maintenance of the separate identities of settlements and green spaces between them as objectives for the core strategy; as Uttlesford lies within a Growth Area, there would be mechanisms for bidding to bridge infrastructure funding gaps under the Government's Growth Area funds but such bids can only be made if the Local Development Framework is progressed and proposals and policies are identified; the local highway network had been improved since 1988 through the construction of the airport road system and the new A120.

A member of the public said that a new community would swallow up the existing village.

She suggested that Councillors should look at a site on the new A120 with easy access which would be more eco friendly. Another member of the public referred to the problems of getting from Elsenham to the A120 and said that option 2 would provide development at Great Dunmow where the infrastructure was already in place and had the ability to cater for expansion. A member of the public asked for a reassurance that nothing was site specific yet and asked why the Environment Committee had not accepted the amendment for a more general approach. The Director of Development confirmed that all four options would be the subject of consultation.

Councillor A Dean said that the process had been deeply flawed due to the way in which it had been handled in the last month. He said that the proposal was not deliverable nor credible. He added that if a new secondary school was built it would impact on the existing Newport and Stansted Schools. He concluded that there was a need to rethink the matter and look at the situation calmly.

In response to a further question, the Chairman of the panel gave an assurance that the views of the public would be taken into account. Councillor Lemon added that the Scrutiny Committee would be considering the matter on 3 October and he hoped that Councillors would not be trying to score political points.

A member of the public said that much of the evidence about the lack of infrastructure was available at the airport inquiry. He said that a development of 3,000 new homes would have serious impact on health services and joined up thinking would be needed. He said that residents depended on the Council to resist the pressures placed on it by Government. Another member of the public said that a new school would be swallowed up by new residents and would not help the existing population. He said that he was also aware of rumours of a proposal for 10,000 houses in the Old Mead Lane vicinity by the Fairfield Partnership.

Another resident said that there were already problems with flooding, power cuts and lack of drinking water in the area and these would be exacerbated by the development proposals. She said that she had been refused an extension to her property as it affected the character of the lane and wondered how planners could now support a proposal for this huge development. She asked what research had been carried out to support the proposals.

Councillor Morson said that there was a need for clarity about what would happen next. He felt that the suggestion that nothing was 'site specific' was a play on words. He said that people felt that these recommendations would go forward in a way which would impact on their community. At the Environment Committee Members were asked to consider three options and the fourth option had not been documented. He concluded that the process was unsatisfactory and Members must go back to the drawing board to look at the principles.

A member of the public raised concern that the East of England Regional Assembly had withdrawn its support for the East of England Plan due to lack of satisfactory infrastructure. He suggested that the Council should take a lead from this decision. In response to a further question, Councillor Ketteridge confirmed that the fourth option was put forward by the Administration, but said that he had not used his casting vote as he was not a member of the Environment Committee.

SWAP14

LOCAL DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK – CORE STRATEGY POLICY CHOICES AND OPTIONS FOR GROWTH

Councillor Sell then moved the following amendment which was seconded by Councillor A Dean.

“The South West Area Panel notes the public disquiet surrounding the announcement of the Council’s Options for Growth strategy and its own dissatisfaction with the extent of information available during public engagement through the panel at previous meetings. It therefore welcomes the decision to call this into the Scrutiny Committee and urges the Council to think again. The Panel believes that no specific locations should be named for houses at this stage, until further research by the Council’s officers is available, carefully evaluated and communicated to members and the residents of Uttlesford”.

Councillor Loughlin asked for a recorded vote which was duly seconded.

For the Motion

Councillors Abrahams
A Dean
C Dean
Godwin
Hudson
Lemon
Loughlin
Morson
Salmon
Sell
Wells

Abstained

Councillors Artus
Jones

RESOLVED that the Motion as set out above be approved.

The Chairman said that despite feelings running high at the meeting he was grateful that so many members of the public had attended and also thanked Councillors for dealing with the questions which had been put. He concluded that it was important that consultation on options for growth were ongoing.

The meeting ended at 9.20 pm.