

Brekun House
Westmill Lane
Ickleford
Hitchin
Herts
SG5 3RN

19 May 2017

David Scholes Esq
Chief Executive
North Hertfordshire District Council
Council Offices
Gernon Road
Letchworth Garden City
SG6 3JF

Dear Mr Scholes

North Herts Draft Local Plan – Recent Developments in Ickleford

I am writing to you because I note from the Council's website that the position of Strategic Director, Planning is currently vacant, and because what I am asking requires action outside the normal procedure for the handling of objections to a draft local plan. I should be most grateful if you would give this letter due consideration. I am copying it (by email) to my local councillor, Mr Harry Spencer-Smith and to Mr David Levett, the Executive Member for Planning.

I am a registered objector to the draft local plan (objection no. 1868). My objection is to the inclusion in the plan of a particular site (IC2) earmarked for housing, and part of another housing site, IC3, both in the village of Ickleford. While I am writing as an individual, the following residents of my street, Westmill Lane, Ickleford (and who are also registered objectors in their own right) have seen a draft of this letter and have asked me to say that they wish to be associated with it:

Mr M. Holford, Icknield House
Mr A. Wallace, Spinney Lodge
Mr and Mrs N. Richardson, Top Park
Mr and Mrs N. Dodds, Gable House
Mr and Mrs L. Maguire, Kingston House
Mrs S. Bancroft-Livingstone, The White House

A copy of this letter does, of course, go to them, and also to the Ickleford Parish Council.

I will not repeat the substance of my submitted objections to the draft local plan, save to reiterate two points that are relevant to the purpose of this letter:

1. The inclusion of site IC2 in the plan appears to have been a marginal decision because it had earlier been rejected on the ground that the site lies in the green belt and its development would “erode the narrow gap between Ickleford and Hitchin” (I quote the council’s words).
2. Site IC3 was added to the plan at its final stage so was never subjected to public consultation.

This letter is motivated by the fact that since last September when the plan was approved by the Cabinet for submission to the government, there have been two significant changes to housing supply in Ickleford:

1. Last month the council’s Planning Control Committee approved a proposed development of 19 houses on the Ickleford Manor site.
2. In March a public exhibition was held in advance of the submission to the council of a planning application for 70 houses on the site of Bowmans’ Mill, Ickleford. While that scheme is yet to be approved, it is hard to see why it would not be, as the alternative would seemingly be to leave this former industrial site to decay.

Neither of these windfall sites had been identified at any stage of the local plan preparation process. Both are ‘previously developed’ commercial sites and, by definition, both lie within the developed part of the village, unlike sites IC2 and IC3 which are edge of village, green belt sites.

It seems to me that had the council been aware of these windfall sites when it was preparing the local plan it is very likely that it would not have felt it necessary to include the previously rejected site IC2. I cannot be as certain about site IC3 because, as stated above, it was only identified at a very late stage and so had not been previously rejected by the council. However, as it too is a green belt site on the edge of the village, there must be a reasonable prospect that it (or most of it since, as I argue in my submitted objection, part of it could be regarded as infill) would also not have been allocated. I also question whether it can still be said that very special circumstances exist for the taking of site IC2 and (most of) site IC3 out of the green belt.

The draft plan is to be submitted to the government by the end of this month and I appreciate that it may be too late to alter it before then. However, this does not mean that the council needs to be committed to defending all its allocated sites irrespective of things that have occurred since the Cabinet meeting last September (or, indeed, which may occur between now and the public examination). Objectors are at a disadvantage when it comes to an inspector’s consideration of objections to a submitted local plan because his/her role is not to consider the planning merits of a disputed allocation but solely to assess whether the plan is ‘sound’. In this respect the process differs from the consideration by inspectors of planning appeals. I am uncertain as to whether inspectors can take into account, in deciding whether a plan is based on sound evidence, changes in a locality that occur after a plan is adopted for

submission, or after submission but before the public examination, but I fear that he/she may not.

The closer we get to the public examination the harder it will be for your officers to take a mental 'step back' and ask themselves whether the allocations remain the right ones. When the various objections were submitted the planning officers no doubt immediately considered whether any of them called into question the 'soundness' of the plan, and since then one may assume that they have been preparing for the public examination, developing the arguments to support the plan and to establish that it is indeed sound, whatever objectors may say. It is only human nature for them to be committed to the draft plan and that commitment will only increase the closer the public examination comes.

However, the council is not required to defend its draft plan in all its details at the public examination, and I do ask that in the specific case of Ickleford more dispassionate attention now be given to whether the plan still represents the best future for the village given the changes that have happened since the plan was approved for submission. The development of housing in the village no longer requires the release of green belt land. Should the allocated sites be approved in addition to the two windfall sites that have emerged, the amount of housing the village will have to accommodate would be ruinous, and far in excess of the level considered likely or appropriate when the Cabinet approved the plan for submission.

It is no answer to this point to argue that the mere allocation of a site in the local plan does not necessarily mean that it will be developed. In the plan-led system we have it is only in exceptional circumstances that a development of land that is included in a recently adopted local plan can be refused on grounds of principle. If sites IC2 and 3 are excluded from the green belt and allocated for housing their development is almost certain.

Yours sincerely

Robert Lewis