# October Newsletter

## Introduction

In last month's column I wrote about the development sites allocated to Knebworth in the Local Plan. This month I will look at the broader context. Development sites are allocated very rarely. The last time this happened in North Herts was in 1992. **Once the current draft plan is approved the pattern of development in North Herts will be set for a generation.**

## Why is this consultation different

I think that some of you are probably suffering from 'consultation fatigue'. NHDC have consulted repeatedly on aspects of the local plan, which is not surprising since it was supposed to be ready by 2011. The most recent consultation, on the so-called *Preferred Options* was in December 2014 and generated about eight and a half thousand responses from around the District, including a several hundred from Knebworth.

This consultation is different because the responses will be examined by the Planning Inspector and will feed into the public enquiry where the Local Plan will finally be adopted (or not). NHDC will run the consultation, although using improved software, but the officers there will simply collate the responses and pass them to the Inspector. Responses may be electronic or on paper, but not by telephone or in person.

## Soundness of a plan

A plan is sound if it is:

* *Positively prepared*,
* *Justified*,
* *Effective* and
* *Consistent with national policy*.

Positive Preparation requires that the plan provides for enough houses, business premises, infrastructure and community facilities. It also requires that the plan is *sustainable*, in the sense that it does not cause irreversible damage to the environment and for the well being of future generations. Although developers are expected, in principle, to pay for infrastructure, there is a requirement that the plan defines what infrastructure is needed. NHDC take the view that no account may be taken of 'Brexit' because it is too early to estimate its effects on housing numbers.

The plan is *justified* only if it is based on compelling evidence and that that evidence is presented alongside the plan itself. The submitted draft must be the best of all possible choices. Other choices for the plan (for example, the much discussed 'New Settlement') must be demonstrated to be inferior to the choice in the plan.

The plan is *effective* if it can be implemented within the available timescale (before 2031). If the plan does not mesh with those of neighbouring authorities, or the infrastructure required to support it cannot be built, the the plan will fail the effectiveness test. The draft submission plan calls for around 1,100 completions a year to be delivered for the latter of the plan period. This is considerably more than North Herts has previously achieved.

The plan must be consistent with national policy. A policy that many local residents have commented on is the need to avoid changing Green Belt boundaries, except under exceptional circumstances. Because of the lack of available sustainable brownfield sites in the District the vast bulk of land allocated for housing is on sites which are currently in the Green Belt. There are many polices in the NPPF (and the associated Planning Practice Guidance website): I suggest that residents consider whether or not the Plan is consistent with the whole of the NPPF, and not just the paragraph relating to the Green Belt.

## Timings

The NHDC Cabinet is scheduled to meet on 26th September to approve the current version of the plan to go forward to consultation. It will then become the 'draft submission plan'. If it is approved, the officers will prepare the material for consultation, and set up the consultation software on the NHDC website. Readers will be pleased to hear that new, improved software is being used this time, so the frustrations which the experienced trying to make representations on the Preferred Options draft *should* be a thing of the past. If all goes according to plan the consultation period will run from the 19th October to the 30th December. Again, this period will run over the Christmas holidays, and potentially means that some residents will have a very short window in which to read the documents and make their submissions.

Much of the draft plan is available on the NHDC website, but minor changes are still being made, so it is not possible to give any links here. Please check the website itself, and social media for the latest updates.

## Other Matters

NHDC continues to make progress with Hitchin Town Hall, which is available for hire again. There is a dispute over the entrance to the adjoining museum facility, but it is hoped that this will be resolved soon.

The budget setting process has begun. Savings will have to be made again this year, not least because we are facing the reality of a negative Revenue Support Grant from central government.

Work is progressing on refurbishing the North Herts Leisure Centre in Letchworth. Much of this work was essential to keep the facility functioning safely, but a new pool and cafe are included in the works.

The council is still seeking bids for refurbishment works on the offices in Gernon Road, Letchworth. Local contractors have plenty of work and have proved reluctant to bid, but this is probably good news for the local economy.