

Tewin Parish Council

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What is happening about house building in Tewin?

Building houses in the village is always a hot topic. Now that local submissions to the East Herts Local Plan Inquiry have been completed, this is a convenient moment to summarise the current situation.

Our local planning authority is East Herts District Council (EHDC), and it is they who decide whether or not to give permission for building new houses. They do this using a set of various "rules". One part of this set is the Local Plan.

The Local Plan is the forward plan for East Herts in which EHDC estimates how much land it needs for housing, industry, retail etc and allocates land accordingly. EHDC gathers local information, but it also has to take account of guidelines and targets set at county and national levels.

Preparation of a new local plan began back in 1999. It has been refined through various stages of public consultation, to get a self consistent draft version ready for the public inquiry. Most of the issues before the inquiry are objections not resolved by previous stages. So EHDC has already considered and rejected them at least once. Changes made by the inspectors at the inquiry will immediately become part of the final version, but they will have to maintain the self consistency of the plan. So don't be surprised if they don't make many significant changes.

The new plan will be adopted early in 2007, even though it relates to a plan period beginning in 2001, and will be used by EHDC to guide planning decisions until 2010.

If there are no changes to the draft plan with respect to Tewin, then we will become a Category 1 village. This means that there can be small scale residential development ("typically up to 15 dwellings on a site, rarely more than 30").

This allocation into categories is something new in this draft of the Local Plan. The parish council has campaigned for Tewin to be made Category 2, which would maintain its existing de facto status - i.e. only allowing infill development ("up to five small dwellings on a site"). With increased pressure for new housing, the parish council considered that it was unlikely that Tewin would qualify for Category 3 - i.e. limited to affordable housing to meet a particular local need.

EHDC believes that Tewin can accommodate a small scale residential development because it is a vital and vibrant community and it has a number of facilities - a shop, a post office, two pubs, a bus service, a school, a garage, and proximity of employment opportunities in WGC. Where some of these facilities may potentially be under threat (e.g. the bus service), EHDC sees a benefit from the extra custom generated by extra housing. EHDC claims that it is "mindful of some local infrastructure constraints" and has therefore "recommended only one modest site in Tewin for housing development".

The Category 1 designation does not apply to the whole parish. It is only effective inside a Village Boundary, which the draft plan shows as being for the most part, tightly drawn around the built-up area based on Lower Green. The rest of the parish remains in the Green Belt.

The Village Boundary does contain one site for small scale development - this is the small field north of Godfries Close and east of Upper Green Road (known as site 8).

The draft plan recommends 23 houses for this site, 9 of which should be "affordable" - e.g. sold on some form of part ownership scheme. Even if this site is adopted into the plan, a detailed planning application will still be required, which takes into account the specific characteristics for the site; and the exact number of dwellings may change.

As mentioned above, the new Village Boundary is tightly drawn around the existing built-up area, which limits the scope for any other major housing developments within the life of the new plan i.e. to 2010.

Last year we had all the interest about Omission Sites. This is to help the Inspectors to keep the new plan self consistent. If they decide to remove a housing site from the draft plan, then they may have to replace it with another site, in order to preserve the overall housing allocation under the plan. EHDC therefore had to provide a list of alternative sites for the inspector to be able to choose from if necessary.

The Local Plan is only based on available land - it is not based on compulsory purchase. Back when the new draft plan was first being assembled, local landowners were able to submit sites for inclusion in the plan. They should not be criticised for this - most of the houses in Tewin are built on land made available by the same process. Of these submitted sites, only the previously mentioned site 8 made it into the final draft plan. All the others which were still available became designated as Omission Sites. and were presented as the list of alternative sites for the Inspectors.

So as "Omission Sites", these sites are only important if the Inspectors make a change to a site already in the draft plan. However, most of these sites are still the subject of outstanding objections to the plan. So in theory, they have two chances of getting into the plan.

Even before the new Local Plan is adopted, EHDC has already begun preliminary work on its successor; although because of new government guidelines, the format will change, and it will be called the Local Development Framework.

The Local Development Framework will have to take account of new requirements contained in the East of England Plan.

The East of England Plan is being generated by the East of England Regional Assembly, which is an unelected body charged with considering plans for the east of England as a whole. It has given rise to many press stories about "building thousands of houses on Green Belt" and in the minds of many people, the East of England Plan and the East Herts Local Plan have become confused.

Yes, we should be concerned about the imposition of somewhat arbitrary targets by an unelected regional body, and the general effect they will have on the resources and the environment of Hertfordshire, but it needs to be kept in context.

The East of England Plan is itself the subject of a public inquiry and will not be adopted until 2007. Many of the extra houses will be concentrated in growth areas next to existing large towns - it is difficult to pinpoint exact figures, but EHDC claims that there is a requirement for 20,800 extra houses in East Herts by 2021, but 10,000 are near Harlow and another 2000 near Bishops Stortford.

The East of England Plan contains no detail specific to Tewin. This will have to wait until EHDC gets down to the detail in its new Local Development Framework. With basically the same set of people trying to solve basically the same set of problems, it will be interesting to see how much of the Local Plan gets carried over into the Local Development Framework.

Having considered the overall situation, we can return to more detail about the public inquiry into the Local Plan.

The Inspectors will consider all the outstanding objections to the Local Plan, including the Tewin Parish Council objections to site 8 and to the intention to make Tewin a Category 1 village. Some objectors have taken up the option of presenting their case directly to one of the two Inspectors.

This required the objector to present further written evidence to the Inquiry, to which EHDC will have produced a detailed written reply. At the public session, the Inspector can ask questions of each side about their written evidence. He gives the other side a chance to comment on the replies, and then allows both sides to sum up. The result is an anti-climax because the Inspector will not say what he thinks until he delivers his report in 2007.

Normally the Inspector would make recommendations, then EHDC would make further changes to the plan, and there would be another round of public consultation before the plan is adopted. However, as mentioned above, the planning process is changing. EHDC were so far advanced in the production of the new Local Plan, that they were allowed to continue under the proviso that the Inspectors would make changes directly to the plan, and then it would be adopted, without further public consultation. Hence their need to keep it self-consistent.

The EHDC representatives also guide the Inspector on planning procedure. They have emphasised that there is a presumption in favour of the current draft of the plan, because it was arrived at by a democratic process, and there is no further democratic process after the Inquiry. Therefore the Inspector can only make changes which are directly in response to an objection; he must only make a change for sound planning reasons; he must only make a change where he is satisfied that the plan is wrong, and that the objector's suggestion is a better solution.

Representatives of the Tewin Residents Group put their case to the Inquiry to get site 8 removed from the plan.

Three other objections were asking for the Village Boundary to be extended to include more housing land.

The first objector wanted the Plume of Feathers (and neighbouring houses), the houses in Tewin Hill, and Seven Acres included, anticipating infill development of between five and ten houses.

The second objector wanted to include the allotment field by the school, anticipating a small scale development of between 20 and 25 houses.

The third objector wanted to include extra land adjacent to site 8 thus extending that site to about 30 houses.

Obviously the underlying reason for these objections is commercial, but planning arguments were required to justify them. The central theme was that because the new Village Boundary was also a Green Belt boundary, then it needed to be stable in the long term. Therefore it needed to include some spare capacity for the future, so as to better resist pressure to change it.

The basic response from EHDC was that they had allocated the land that they needed for housing, and had then drawn the Village Boundary as tightly as possible, in order to remove the minimum amount of land from the Green Belt. They believed that any further allocation of land within the Village Boundary would not simply be spare capacity for the future, but would be brought forward for housing in excess of the targets of the plan.

Their target was a total of 300 houses from the villages in East Herts, and the plan has identified 309 (plus a reserve site in Puckeridge with a capacity of 47). Based on past experience, EHDC know that there will be a number of additional unplanned "windfall" developments, and they expect this to increase because the plan has a slight relaxation of the criteria for infilling. Even though the new plan is not adopted yet, we are already halfway through the plan period, and EHDC is projecting an overall completion of 12,500 houses against an original target of 11,000.

So confident are EHDC of achieving their targets, that they told the Inspector that if he did decide to remove site 8, then there was no need to replace it.

When the Tewin Residents Group presented their objection, they were backed up by about 30 residents. At the three other sessions there were eight to ten residents present. Sessions have also been attended by District Councillors, Parish Councillors and Tewin Society representatives.

For further information:

Local Plan - www.eastherts.gov.uk/local%20plans/locplan.htm

Public Inquiry - www.eastherts.gov.uk/local%20plans/LocalPlanEnquiry/index.htm

Current Draft of Local Plan - www.eastherts.gov.uk/local%20plans/Contents/index.htm

East of England Plan - www.eera.gov.uk/category.asp?cat=120&id=sxe167-a77f5420

Government Office for The East of England - www.go-east.gov.uk/

East of England Development Agency - www.eeda.org.uk/

Finally, a plug for volunteers to join a steering group to develop the Tewin Parish Plan. In describing the new planning structures surrounding the Local Development Framework, EHDC makes specific mention of the value of Parish Plans. If you have time to spare and you are interested in housing and other planning issues, then this is your opportunity to join in, and help protect the long term future of the village. If you are interested, then please contact Councillor Steve Stott 01438 717680 or Rosemary Nodder (Chairman of the Tewin Society) 01438 798705.

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