

Rt Hon Peter Lilley MP.
House of Commons,
London,
SW1A 0AA

7th January 2015

Dear Mr Lilley,

The NHDC Local Plan and its impact on Pirton, Hertfordshire

Last night I attended a public meeting to learn about the North Hertfordshire Local Plan - the preferred options for which are currently in consultation. Included in the meeting was a presentation and question and answer session with Cllr David Levett.

To say that I am disappointed with Pirton's situation would be inaccurate - frustrated, let down by some of our Council and Government representatives, depressed still would not cover it and I know that many other members of the Pirton community feel exactly the same.

The Government's drive to build houses has resulted in huge targets being set for development in many locations across the country. I cannot blame North Hertfordshire District Council for that fact – that is the responsibility of the Government, however I can blame them for the strategy they have adopted to meet that target.

Having been unable to understand the NHDC strategy for choosing sites that meet the criteria for sustainable development from the background documents I have read so far, I had intended to ask a question to clarify whether the strategy was to choose locations that would benefit from sustainable development, e.g. to :

- a. sustain existing facilities that might be currently under used, e.g. local shops, schools, pubs etc
- b. choose location with currently adequate facilities and support their expansion to meet the new need or
- c. enable new facilities to become viable?

however, it was clear that it is none of those.

Rather than adopting a strategy based on sustainable development that supports the community and proactively working with them to identify suitable land locations, they have simply accepted most developer proposed suggestions - presumably as an easy and convenient way of meeting their target. In other words, the process is being developer-led and certainly this is the case for Pirton.

Pirton, which as you are aware is a beautiful, quintessentially unspoilt English village with a generally happy and close-knit community, has received a proposal for a total allocation of 142 houses towards the NHDC target. In other words, a proposed growth of at least 27%. With the exception of Wymondley, which appears to be an unusual case, this is proportionally the highest figure in North Herts. It is not based on any detailed analysis of our facilities or need compared

with other locations, just simply that two developers have suggested sites. In comparison Ashwell and Graveley, both of which have immediate access to better and more comprehensive facilities (e.g. shops, railway stations, doctors), only receive allocations of 8.2% and 7.6% respectively. Many other villages appear to have been ignored in the allocations, simply because no developers have come forward with sites.

This is not nimby-ism. The recent Pirton Neighbourhood Plan questionnaire (copy attached) has properly sought the views of the community and has an extraordinary mandate, given that its response rate of returns is 80% from households and 76% from adults (16+). Rather than just saying no to development, the community has given a reasoned consideration and has indicated their acceptance that reasonable growth for Pirton in the Local Plan period would work. They consider that to be 48 houses – presumably over and above those built or currently approved which are included in the NHDC figure (7). This equates to 10.6% and would then put Pirton at about the mid-point of the North Herts. development table, which seems reasonable.

Also rather than two large developments, 46% wanted developments of less than 10 houses and 24% of between 10 and 25 houses. Probably because this was considered the best way of lessening the impact on the village and the concerns identified below.

The questionnaire identifies one of the overwhelming concerns of the Pirton community as that of the impact to the 'community feel' – well-being? This surely should also be a serious consideration when measuring sustainability, and the analysis offers the following précis:

"My concern is that Pirton will lose it's village 'feel' and atmosphere and become another suburban sprawl like so may villages roundabout. Pirton is a gem and should remain so"

"I'm concerned Pirton would lose it's identity as a close knit village if the scale of development was not restrained"

At best, the strategy for identifying the potential sites in Pirton is lazy and no effort has been made to obtain and carry forward the support of the community. Of the two sites identified (by developers), Priors Hill and Holwell Turn, the questionnaire identifies the community's support as only 23% and 11%, while those that would prefer other sites to be used was 38% (inside current boundary) and 18% (outside current boundary) – both the above sites are outside the current boundary. For the former when it was included (in the proposals, not in the allocation) it received a massive 275 submissions, 262 of which were objections and many had clear, sensible and reasoned arguments. Yet we were told last night that despite this, the assessment of the sites had overridden the clear view of the community. For the latter, when the other had planning applications submitted for just 8 houses (as opposed to the suggested 47) they received first 86, and then 120 objections. The application was subsequently refused on appeal.

Despite the above, both sites remain in the Preferred Options report – could you explain how this fits with democracy and the Government's stated aim for the Localism Act (2011), i.e. *"The Government thinks that the local community should have a greater say in shaping the way their local area develops"*?

Last night we were told that if these sites were not to be used, then we would have to identify the other sites – the consultation period started 18/12/2014 and ends 6/2/2015! Surely it should be the duty of the local authority to work with the community to identify other potential sites, especially as Pirton is mid-way through producing a Neighbourhood Plan and not just accept developer proposals?

Also given that Pirton and other locations are well advanced in developing Neighbourhood Plans surely they should at least have the opportunity to feed into and, where reasonable, to influence the Local Plan as part of the consultation?

My concerns do not end here; given the community's anxiety of over-development destroying our sense of 'well-being', questions were asked about how, irrespective of whatever number of houses are finally agreed as an allocation, we could protect ourselves from over development? Particularly if unrelated planning applications are received over and above the allocation and how we could control the rate of development to a sustainable rate over the 20-year period of the Local Plan? To the first, the answer was very little because of the Government's enforced policy of "*presumption in favour of sustainable development*" and probably nothing in respect of the latter.

It was also noted that NHDC were proposing to redraw the village boundary, not only to encompass the two identified sites, but to arbitrarily include another large area of land which could obviously lead to additional pressure from developers to develop even larger numbers of new houses.

We already have a developer trying to ensure that their view takes precedent over the consultation by submitting an outline planning application for the development of Priors Hill. Surely commonsense means that this is obviously wrong, if the consultation is to be genuine? It is almost certain that the application will be considered before the consultation and the results are received and assessed, which must surely be wrong?

Obviously I intend to submit my views and comments as part of the Preferred Options consultation, which is difficult to do properly given the very short period of consultation, but apart from the questions raised above I wish to ask you the following:

Given the Government's enforced policy of "*presumption in favour of sustainable development*" and the timeframe of the consultation, how can we as a community protect one of the most important aspects of living in Pirton, namely our close community feel? Is this not also an important consideration under the rather (*and deliberately?*) vague measure of sustainability?

In conclusion and not Pirton-specific I would like to make my personal view clear. I may not understand or agree with the Government figures which are driving the national development need, but with the, at best, vague requirement of "*sustainable development*" being the overwhelming presumption in favour of any and all development. Your Government has handed control of development to the developers and removed much of the opportunity for individuals and the community to make reasonable and reasoned objections to planning applications for years to come. In my opinion this will not result in good quality development in the right locations and defeats the aims of Localism. As someone said last night you should not be able to build a 'carbuncle' on the side of a beautiful property, why should it be any different for a town or village? I think that it is quite likely that this Government's changes to planning will have detrimental impact on many of this country's 'special' locations and if I am right it will be a long time before I could bring myself to vote Conservative again.

Yours Sincerely

Jonty Wild

Copies to Cllrs. David Levett, Clare Strong and David Barnard, Pirton Parish Council and the community of Pirton
