

THE HITCHIN SOCIETY

SNAP - Stevenage and North Hertfordshire Action Plan Response to Key Issues and Options Consultation, November 2007

The following responses are given by the Hitchin Society to the specific questions raised in the SNAP consultation document. This can be seen at www.stevenage.gov.uk

SNAP 1

We do not consider that the boundaries shown on Map 1 are appropriate. The widely drawn boundaries to the areas of search shown on Map 1 would lead ultimately to low density and unsustainable development involving excessive incursions into Green Belt land. In particular, the West Area of Search (coloured green on Map 2) would, if taken to its logical conclusion, result in highly damaging intrusion into the Langley Valley impacting on the landscape quality of the land on both sides of the B656 road. Similarly, the North West Area of Search (coloured orange on Map 2) would lead to virtual coalescence with Little Wymondley, and would approach close to St Ippolyts, settlements traditionally associated much more closely with Hitchin than Stevenage.

We also have concern that no consideration appears to be given to an Area of Search to the south east of Stevenage to make use of the communications corridor formed by the Hertford Road A602 and the Stevenage-Hertford railway line. The need for high quality public transport is a key issue if car-dependency is to be reduced and the potential offered by this corridor does not appear to have been adequately taken into account in selecting the areas of search.

SNAP 2

The Vision and Objectives are not right. A Vision that is focused on expansion of Stevenage to the north and west in the form of relatively low density housing developments is simply not compatible with sustainable development against any objective test. Although the Vision Statement expresses very desirable sentiments, it is far from clear how these will be fulfilled by the proposed development; indeed some of the objectives are mutually incompatible and therefore do not provide a sound basis for taking the development forward.

The Key Spatial Objectives need to give much higher priority to sustainability issues, in particular the Carbon Neutral objective needs to be strengthened to require on-site Combined Heat and Power from renewable sources from the outset of the development, the highest standard of thermal efficiency of the housing stock, the minimisation of water use through recycling and other measures, and the establishment of genuinely sustainable transport policies. In particular, reliable and affordable public transport needs to be in place from the date of occupation of the first houses if a culture of car-dependence is not to become established. It is only through the adoption of such measures from the outset that the proposals can be regarded as sustainable development in any meaningful sense.

SNAP 3

The west facing slopes of the Langley Valley, including the surroundings of Almshoe Bury (Hertfordshire's oldest inhabited building) and the Almshoe swallow-hole, a RIGS (Regionally Important Geological Site, of significance to the hydrology of this area) should be

preserved in the West Area of Search. It is also essential that the ancient woodlands (and SSSI) in Watery Grove, as well as Cannocks Wood, Newton Wood, Burleigh Grove, Burleighcroft Wood and Wintergreen Wood should not be lost to development. The slopes of Chesfield Park, forming part of 'Forster Country' in the North Area of Search should also be protected from urban development.



The Langley Valley west of Stevenage

SNAP 4

The Areas of Search have certainly been drawn too widely and will encourage relatively low-density development that will be environmentally damaging and inherently unsustainable. It is not possible to provide a simplistic ranking from “most suitable” to “least suitable” as suggested by the question. The most sustainable form of new development would be to use brownfield sites within Stevenage as these become available over the period to 2021, and in particular to encourage much higher density developments within the existing built-up area of Stevenage. Opening up large areas of greenfield sites to development will discourage developers from the more difficult, but environmentally more satisfactory, re-use of previously developed land nearer to the centre of Stevenage. It is noted that in other towns in Hertfordshire, brownfield developments near town centres are achieving densities of up to 180 dwellings per hectare; similar ambitious targets should be adopted for Stevenage as part of its approach towards meeting current housing requirements.

It is also considered that the transport corridor to the south east of Stevenage should provide the potential for sustainable development in a way that the proposed Areas of Search cannot without a much higher level of infrastructure investment.

Of the identified Areas of Search, for the reasons given above, we consider that Option E (western sector), Option D (north west sector) and parts of Option C (north sector) are the least suitable for development.

SNAP 5

We support Option A. Concentration of employment sites within existing employment areas will enhance the options for public transport which would not be possible with a more dispersed pattern of employment sites.

There is little credibility that providing new employment sites within the SNAP areas would reduce the distance of travelling to work as it would be very unlikely that residents of a given area would find employment in the same area; a more likely consequence would be inward commuting, possibly from beyond Stevenage, at the same time as local residents were commuting to jobs elsewhere.

SNAP 6

Option A - New employment land within the existing employment areas should be released in phases.

SNAP 7

Although we believe that policy should generally be based on making the best use of the existing highway infrastructure, we recognise that an exception should possibly be made for the widening of the A1(M) between Junction 6 and Junction 8.

SNAP 8

Presumably some form of northern distributor road would be inescapable if large-scale development were to take place to the north of Stevenage. However, consideration should be given to this being a bus-only road (a bus-way) if sustainable transport is to be encouraged, and car use discouraged. The reference on Map 4 to such a road as an 'East West Link' raises concerns that this may be intended to be part of a more ambitious scheme such as the 'East West Link' advanced by the former Dept of Transport as a new road from Oxford to Stansted. We would strongly object to such a road becoming part of a long-distance arterial route.



St Nicholas' Church, north of Stevenage

SNAP 9

Option B - A road to the A602 Wymondley bypass would be highly undesirable as this would add to congestion on the A602 route through Hitchin (already congested in the evening peak with tailbacks to east of the Redcoats bridge). An inevitable consequence of this would be a new south-western bypass to Hitchin linking the A602 to the A505 towards Luton, and connecting with an eventual Luton northern bypass. The creation of such a major east-west route would encourage growth in motor traffic which would be highly undesirable on environmental grounds, including greenhouse gas emissions.

SNAP 10

Option B - A new road link to the B656 Hitchin to Codicote Road would be totally unacceptable, both in terms of the character of the B656 itself (with its poor accident record) and the level of traffic on this road at peak times (southbound in the morning, northbound in the evening). The B656 is highly congested in both Hitchin and Codicote at peak times with no realistic way of relieving these bottlenecks; there is simply no capacity available to take additional traffic from an expanded Stevenage.

This has already been recognised in the work over the last 12 years planning for the development west of the A1(M) at Stevenage. This scheme is based on the sole means of vehicular access being under the A1(M) from Gunnels Wood Road, Stevenage, and with no access permitted to the B656. Any new road now proposed to the B656 would totally negate the effect of this well-established policy, and any new development west of Stevenage should conform to this principle.

A new road to the B656 would also change the proposal into being a “South of Hitchin” development, rather than being an extension of Stevenage as envisaged in the East of England Plan.

SNAP 11

Protection should certainly be given to an area of high quality landscape associated with Forster Country, although it also needs to be recognised that part of the area has been degraded by electricity pylons and power lines, as well as by housing already built in the area. It is suggested that any new housing should be concentrated in areas where the landscape has already been damaged.

SNAP 12

It is far from clear that the growth of Stevenage should continue beyond 2021, and it may well be that the currently planned phase of expansion will bring Stevenage to its natural limit. It would then be preferable to identify other areas, elsewhere in Hertfordshire or beyond, to absorb additional housing requirements through to 2031.

SNAP 13

Option B - A relatively high density should be the aim for the centre of the new housing areas to provide a focal point and sense of community; also to provide the “critical mass” to justify and support high quality public transport provision. This would also serve to minimise the

land take, a very important consideration in an area where housing pressures are forcing growth areas such as Stevenage into virtual coalescence with neighbouring settlements. The centre of new housing areas should aspire to densities of at least 75dph (modest compared with new developments in Hitchin at up to 180dph).

The policy on minimum density should not be left to the development industry if the most effective use is to be made of scarce land resources.

SNAP 14

Option A - Higher densities especially in neighbourhood centres.

SNAP 15

We would not suggest an upper limit for densities as it is essential that the most effective use is made of scarce land resources.

SNAP 16

Option B - It is essential that the local authority retains control over the mix of housing to be built (in some of Hertfordshire's towns, new development consists predominantly of small, two-bedroom flats which would be quite inappropriate for the new housing areas of Stevenage).

SNAP 17

Option A - No. This is a sensitive and difficult issue, but it needs to be recognised that towns and villages throughout Hertfordshire each have their own characteristics resulting from their very different origins and the ways in which they have evolved over time. This forms an important part of providing people with choice in the type of area in which they would prefer to live.

Stevenage has evolved in a specific way to meet housing needs within a high quality urban environment, and this achievement now forms an important part of the heritage of the town. Against this background, there is very little evidence of any shortage in "aspirational housing" in the wider area surrounding Stevenage, and no doubt this is taken into account by businesses wishing to attract professional and managerial staff to the area. Given the need to make the most effective use of land released from the Green Belt, while at the same time meeting the targets for the number of new dwellings required, with a mix of social and market housing, it would seem unnecessary, and perhaps counter-productive, to require developers to include pockets of very low-density housing in areas where the driving force will be towards high-density development.

There may well be a demand for "Executive Apartments" in Stevenage, but these may more realistically be provided close to the town centre or in the Old Town rather than in the outlying Areas of Search.

SNAP 18

It is essential that a high standard of design is achieved in the new housing, not only in the design of the individual houses but also in their massing and layout, especially in respect to the street scene. It is very important that a step change is achieved from the standards normally associated with large-scale housing schemes in the UK, and this requires a particular sensitivity to achieving a human scale to the development, with high quality materials, and an imaginative approach to layout. It is particularly important to ensure that the street scene is not dominated by parked vehicles, and that the layout provides for permeability by pedestrians and cyclists without being used by through motor traffic. The design concept must provide a feeling of security and safety, designing out opportunities for criminal or anti-social behaviour, incorporating “safe by design” principles.

SNAP 19

While wishing to create the best of a “village” feel to the new neighbourhoods, it would be quite wrong to use pastiche or false-historical styles for the housing. It is important that the housing and any community and commercial buildings represent the best of 21st century design, incorporating the most modern environmental features, while avoiding the brutalism that characterised high density urban developments in recent decades.

SNAP 20

Option A or B. Modern housing development rarely enhances the nearby countryside, and there is little reason to expect that the proposed developments will be any different in this respect. Given that the housing areas will approach existing settlements with little separation, it is important that the most effective use is made of planting to screen the new housing areas.

SNAP 21

Option B - The new developments should be of high density to minimise land-take and to support good public services. As far as possible this should ensure that existing settlements are not incorporated within the new development areas.

SNAP 22

Option A

SNAP 23

Option C - It is essential that affordable housing is not visibly different from, and is fully integrated with, market housing if high standards are to be achieved and maintained, and areas of social disadvantage and even deprivation are to be avoided.

SNAP 24

Option B - The relatively low-density approach to the layout of the New Town has served Stevenage well, although there are less satisfactory implications in terms of land-take, and difficulties in providing viable public transport. The new housing areas will provide a very different context, with open country close at hand, and a greater-than-ever need to meet high standards of sustainability. A different model would be more appropriate for the new areas in

which the focal point would be a high-density core, equivalent to the centre of a large village or small town, and with rather less open areas than in the New Town. There would of course be the need for recreation grounds, allotments etc, but without the generous provision of green areas as elsewhere in Stevenage.

SNAP 25

Most of the facilities would be needed, and the test should be what would be provided in a relatively self-contained small town. It is essential that the neighbourhood centres should be vibrant, successful centres in their own right and not be allowed to become run-down or vandalised, so as to be unattractive or even threatening at night. To help counter this, they should be on public transport routes, possibly serving as interchange nodes.

SNAP 26

Option A - The technology exists now for carbon-neutral housing and therefore there is no reason to delay implementation until an arbitrary date in the future. If the expansion of Stevenage is to be sustainable in any meaningful sense, the aim should be for carbon-neutral housing from, say, 2012.

Other aspects of sustainability should be required, including obligatory use of Combined Heat and Power (CHP) for all significant commercial and public buildings, with any surplus heat being used for district heating systems.

Pressure should be brought on the government to adopt “feed-in tariff” arrangements as in Germany and other European countries to encourage households to make the most effective use of micro-generation equipment (such as CHP).

For the civil engineering infrastructure that SNAP will inevitably require (new roads, drainage, CHP plant, etc.) there should be the requirement for all such development to achieve a CEEQUAL Excellent rating. (CEEQUAL is the civil engineering equivalent of BREEAM – see www.ceequal.com and is adopted as a core policy by Defra.)

SNAP 27

Option A - Clear and demanding targets should be set for the use of renewable energy, including the application of the “Merton rule” requiring developers to incorporate renewable energy production equipment on site to deliver at least 10% of the new buildings’ energy requirements.

SNAP 28

Policies to reduce car-dependence are essential to the achievement of sustainable development, and most of the options listed in the question are relevant to this aim. Of particular importance would be:

- Frequent, high quality, reliable and cost effective (*i.e.* affordable) public transport.
- Priority to pedestrians and cyclists (and public transport) over the car.
- Attractive and safe footpaths and cycle networks.

SNAP 29

Option E - An extension of the existing Dyes Lane site appears likely to be the most realistic and sustainable option.

SNAP 30

A key issue touched on in our response to SNAP 1 relates to the selection of Areas of Search.

During the period covered by these proposals (*i.e.* to 2021) it would seem highly likely that policies will be adopted to restrict the growth in motor transport, both to limit the effects of congestion, but more importantly to reduce the growth in greenhouse gas emissions. Housing developments, such as in the proposed Areas of Search, are well away from established public transport corridors and it would be impracticable (as well as prohibitively expensive) for these areas to be serviced by sustainable modes of transport.

In contrast, there is the transport corridor stretching south east from Stevenage served by the A602 road (with potential for being upgraded) and the lightly-used rail line from Stevenage to Hertford. It is recognised that this rail line functions as a key diversionary route, and would not be available for conversion to, say, light rail. Nevertheless, the potential offered by this route for local transport purposes, serving housing areas to the south east of Stevenage, is an opportunity that should not be ignored in seeking sustainable locations for new housing development.

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