

Date: 4 November 2013
Your Ref.
Our Ref: LA3 petition
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Dear Mr Belson,

PETITION RE DEVELOPMENT AT WEST HEMEL HEMSPETAD (LA3)

Further to my letter of 3rd October, sent to you via email, I am now able to provide a response to the petition submitted by the West Hemel Action Group (WHAG) in objection to the above development. This petition stated that *"We, the undersigned oppose Dacorum Borough Council building on Green Belt land at West Hemel Hempstead, (known as LA3)."*

This petition was passed to me on 25th September 2013 and referred to by the Leader of the Council as part of the debate on the Core Strategy adoption at Full Council that evening.

Consideration of the petition:

It is clear from the wording of the petition that WHAG and the petition signatories wish to see the LA3 development removed from the Core Strategy. It is important to note that this was not an option that the Council could consider. The only options available to Members were to adopt the Core Strategy with the amendments required by the Planning Inspector following last year's Examination, or not to adopt the Core Strategy.

Concerns regarding the LA3 site did however form a significant part of the debate at the Full Council meeting. Following this debate, Councillors voted by 36 votes to 4 to adopt the Core Strategy. This decision and the minutes of the meeting have been published on the Council's website:

<http://web.dacorum.gov.uk/docs/default-source/council-democracy/council---13-09-25---minutes.pdf?sfvrsn=0>



As I advised in my email of 3rd October acknowledging receipt of the petition, contrary to the information published on the WHAG website, no further date will be set for Full Council to debate the LA3 site further. The Core Strategy was clearly on the published agenda for the 25 September Full Council meeting as a Cabinet referral. Councillor Williams made it clear at the meeting that the petition would be dealt with as part of the debate of that referral.

The Petition Scheme (referred to below), which forms part of the Council's Constitution was drawn up with the intent of ensuring concerns highlighted through petitions were fully considered by Members. It does not set out a prescribed process: rather it lists a series of potential actions.

The decision of Full Council followed on from previous discussions and debate on the Core Strategy – and specific sites within it, including LA3. This involved meetings of Full Council, Cabinet and the Strategic Planning and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Councillors also discussed the overall housing target, the need for Green Belt releases and the location of these through a series of more informal 'Task and Finish Group' meetings held between 2009 and 2011. Whilst your petition has not been explicitly referred to any of these meetings, the subject of LA3 to which the petition relates has been subject to considerable Member discussion.

Following the decision of Full Council The principle of releasing Green Belt land at West Hemel Hempstead for housing and related development has now been agreed. Details relating to the design and layout of the scheme, including a draft masterplan, will be considered further by Members in the early part of 2014, before being published for public consultation.

Background to site LA3:

Finding new land for much needed local homes is always a challenge for Councils, particularly in the Home Counties where development pressures are historically high and there is high quality countryside, much of which also covered by Green Belt designation.

The Government's National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), published last year, makes it clear that where Green Belt exists, boundaries should be established within the authority's Local Plan to meet the area's identified requirements for sustainable development. Dacorum's Core Strategy does just that. New housing will be provided through a combination of using land already built on ('brownfield' sites) and a carefully selected set of Green Belt sites, including LA3.

The Planning Inspector's main concern when weighing up whether or not to find the Core Strategy 'sound' or not, was if the Council had allocated *sufficient* land for housing, not if any of the Green Belt sites should be removed from the plan.

In order to understand why LA3 has been allocated for development by the Council, it is important to understand how housing targets are set. A key decision of the Coalition Government was to scrap top-down targets, previously found within Regional Plans, and let local Councils like Dacorum decide for themselves.

However, these local decisions have to be made in the context of the NPPF. The NPPF requires Councils to significantly boost the supply of housing and make sure there is an on-going supply of deliverable land to build on. Dacorum has followed this advice and created a new plan for the Borough based on balancing the requirement to meet our own locally generated housing needs (set out in independent projections produced by the Office for National Statistics) and the constraints posed by local infrastructure and designations such as the Green Belt and Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

In recent years, Dacorum has been very successful in delivering new homes on brownfield sites - 93% of new homes built in the Borough 2011/12 were on land that had been developed previously. Developments such as Apsley Lock at the former John Dickinson site and The Image development based on the old Kodak tower are good examples of these. But this is a diminishing resource and if we are to meet local needs we would not have a robust, defensible plan without the use of some Green Belt land. The alternative of under-providing would only lead to speculative proposals to build on unallocated Green Belt sites, over which local people have had no say.

Dacorum takes the protection of the Green Belt seriously and it is for this reason amongst others why the process of preparing the Core Strategy has taken a number of years to bring to a conclusion. Following the decision of Full Council on 25th September we now have an adopted Core Strategy which gives people certainty about the future. The Council will go on resisting inappropriate developments within the Green Belt as we have in the past. We must however progress the housing sites that are allocated within the Core Strategy to ensure we provide for the needs of this and coming generations.

If Full Council had voted not to adopt the Core Strategy, this would not have meant that the West Hemel Hempstead scheme would not be built. In fact the likely impact upon the Green Belt would be far greater. This is because without an up-to-date development plan in place Councils are far less able to resist speculative applications for housing in the Green Belt. Indeed it is very likely that non-adoption of the Core Strategy would only hasten the submission of a planning application on LA3. As well as this, other developers with interests in Green Belt sites around Hemel Hempstead (and beyond) would have also have been expected to submit their schemes. Whilst the Council could have tried to refuse these applications, they would have stood a very high chance of being allowed by a Planning Inspector through the planning appeals process.

Next Steps:

As you are already aware, the decision to include LA3 within the Core Strategy is only the first stage of a lengthy process. It will be through the masterplan, Site Allocations document and ultimately the planning application for the site that many of the key issues WHAG and local residents have raised about the site will be addressed.

We would encourage WHAG and all residents who signed the petition to be involved with this future work. Your involvement will help ensure that local concerns about the future shape of the development are taken fully into account.

The Council, in conjunction with the developers Taylor Wimpey and Barratts, have already begun work on a masterplan for the site. WHAG and many residents responded to the '*Shaping the masterplan*' consultation held this summer. This sought feedback on some draft principles intended to form the basis for this masterplan. A report of the feedback received from this consultation will be published soon and Officers and the developers are already discussing how best to amend and amplify the development principles as a result of comments received.

The next time that Councillors will formally consider site LA3 will be when they are asked to agree draft versions of the masterplan and Site Allocations document for consultation next Spring. The Site Allocations document is very important as it will set out clear requirements for the development and also the expected timing of the site's release for development. Precise meeting dates have yet to be agreed, but both documents will be initially considered by Cabinet before being referred to Full Council for further debate.

Petition process:

I hope that the above information, together with that provided on previous occasions by the Council, explains why the difficult decision to allocate LA3 for housing development had to be made, and why the Council could not take the action requested by the petition's signatories.

The process for considering petitions is set out in the 'Petition Scheme', which forms part of the Council's constitution. This Petition Scheme is available on the Council's website:

<http://web.dacorum.gov.uk/docs/default-source/council-democracy/council-constitution---part-9---petitions-scheme.pdf?Status=Master&sfvrsn=0>

If you are unhappy with how your petition has been considered by the Council, then the Petition Scheme allows you to request a review of the process. This review process does however not include a reconsideration of the actual decision of Full Council to adopt the Core Strategy.

If you would like further information about this review process, please contact Jim Doyle, Group Manager – Democratic Services on 01442 228222 or email Jim.Doyle@dacorum.gov.uk

If there is any further information that I or any members of my team can help you with please let me know.

Yours sincerely,

Chris Taylor
Group Manager - Strategic Planning & Regeneration