

'We will listen to your

LAST week the *Reporter* challenged Uttlesford District Council (UDC) over its 15-year housing plan to build 880 homes in the town. It came off the back of strong public opposition.

We asked a series of questions on the lips of resident groups and the town and parish councils opposing the plans.

We handed these pages over to the council for an explanation - tell us what you think of the responses. E-mail editor@saffronwalden-reporter.co.uk

THERE has understandably been a great deal of comment about Uttlesford District Council's draft Local Plan, and especially the housing proposals, during the recent consultation.

It is inevitable that there would be opposition somewhere in the district no matter where new homes were proposed. Previous single settlement proposals attracted equal opposition to the current dispersal strategy, although at that time there was little support for the single settlement from Saffron Walden or other towns and villages.

UDC is listening to residents' concerns; indeed we would not be consulting if we didn't want to hear peoples' views.

We are in the middle of a consultation exercise and are now in the process

of analysing the many contributions we have received from residents, developers and other interested parties. All views will be taken into account and where there are sound planning reasons we will of course take great care to demonstrate how we have incorporated those views into the plan.

Ultimately, we have to be confident that the final proposal will stand up to scrutiny from the Planning Inspectorate. It will be based on sound planning reasons and backed up with the necessary technical evidence. We cannot be put in a position where we are pre-judging the outcome of the consultation and before various technical studies are completed and, moreover, before we have taken all the representations into account.

That said, we welcome the offer from the *Reporter* to add clarity on this occasion to various points that have been

made in recent weeks.

The cabinet agreed to consult on a dispersed strategy at its meeting of May 10 after an exhaustive examination of the pros and cons of both a dispersed and single-settlement strategy. The council has a responsibility to plan for growth in the whole district - there are many areas where more housing is needed and the dispersal option has been chosen for consultation because it spreads that housing across settlements which already have infrastructure in place. It means the benefits of new development can be focused on existing areas where there is a need. It also means improvements such as new playing fields, roads, and schools can be provided.

Developing a Local Plan is a complex process and while the *Reporter* can draw up a list of questions, providing simple answers to these is unfortu-

nately not so straightforward.

Nonetheless we will attempt to answer those specific questions as simply as we can:

Q Is the council willing to start again following the weight of public opposition and instead come up with a plan which is backed by sound evidence-based studies with explanations on how it is sustainable for the district?

A This assumes that the draft plan is not based on sound evidence-based studies. This is not the case. The evidence base comprises around 30 studies, and further assessments taking into account the specific draft site allocations are being carried out in parallel with the public consultation on the draft plan and other matters including infrastructure proposals. The evidence base includes a sustainability appraisal of the options, and of the draft allocations. While we are anticipating amending the plan in the light of representations, 'starting again', as the *Reporter* puts it, would be unrealistic. This is because any decision on what we submit finally for public examination will have to demonstrate that we have taken into account the issues raised in representations on the range of options at each stage of the plan preparation. The context of the draft plan proposals, for example, includes the issues raised in

considering development of a new settlement at Elsenham with limited development in the towns and villages.

Q Can UDC explain how the decision was taken to adopt a dispersal strategy approach in favour of a single settlement when all the evidence in the last five years points to it being the least sustainable solution?

A It is not correct that it is the "least sustainable solution" and the evidence simply does not say this. There are pros and cons of each option as set out in the report that went to cabinet in May.

Sustainability is a matter of judgment which includes performance against a range of objectives which are set at a European level. It will rarely be the case that a policy or proposal will be consistent with all objectives, but preparing a plan involves choices informed by an understanding of the likely effects.

There are numerous reasons why the dispersal option has been chosen for consultation over the single settlement, following a great deal of further technical work. We looked at the issue. There are numerous reasons why the dispersal option has been chosen for consultation over the single settlement, following a great deal of further technical work. We looked at the issue in the context of which would deliver more sites for businesses, the impact on air quality, helping retailers, water supplies and

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