

## LOCAL PLAN REGULATION 19 DEBATE

19TH JUNE 2018

Speech by Cllr Alan Dean

Madam Chairman

This is a Crunch Council Meeting. We either vote for the best plan on offer, noting that no one has come up with a better one, OR, once again, Uttlesford District Council can bury its head in the sand and continue its quest for a Perfect Promised Land that almost certainly does not exist.

Whichever way each of us decides to vote, I hope no one will lose site of the following stark facts:

The average cost of a home in Uttlesford is 11.7 times the average income of people working in this district. Today couples need a joint income of £74,241 to purchase an average priced **2-bedroom** property in Uttlesford at £305,700. Our villages are turning into ghettos for well-healed people. Our children and grandchildren are being denied their own decent homes because demand has been outstripping supply for years.

I'm fine. I have a house and no mortgage. I bet most people in this room tonight are comfortably settled in their own homes. I paid £6,800 for my first 3-bedroom home in Stansted. My grandchildren haven't a hope in hell of following my and my wife's progress through life unless there is radical action.

So for those who say "yes, I recognise there is a housing shortage crisis, but it doesn't exist and shouldn't be solved on my doorstep", I say face the facts and think of younger generations and others less fortunate.

The search for "perfection" and the avoidance of responsibility at Uttlesford District Council has taken various forms in the past. In 2006 there was an administration - a Liberal Democrat one - that put off hard choices at the start of preparing this plan until a later date. In 2007 a new administration - then a Conservative one - chose an approach that was undeliverable. It took a further seven years - and many an itch and twitch in between - for the infamous Hellsenham finally to be ditched.

The Council wavered from totally distributed answers for homes to a single new settlement, back to total distribution amongst most towns and villages; then back to a single, inaccessible new town; and now, finally, it chose three new settlements and some lesser continued growth in certain towns and villages. The Council even went through a stage of denial that people don't move to Uttlesford from distant places; so immigration data was ignored! New people always have and they always will come here to live, short of a major economic collapse - which no one wants!

Throughout the past 12 years of dithering, growth has continued. Sadly, much of it has been thrust upon us because of the absence of an up-to-date Local Plan. Take Elsenham, which has had hundreds of homes approved without even a hint of a master plan and any joined-up planning. The growing traffic chaos that is inflicting on Stansted, my own community, is rotten, simply rotten. It's mainly because there was no up-to-date Local Plan and lots of ad hoc approvals.

I would like to dismiss rival party politics from this current debate.

I read on Facebook at the weekend that non-Conservative councillors should try their damndest to vote down the Local Plan because it is a Conservative Party Plan from a Conservative administration.

Well, let me put such ideological nonsense to rest. There is already enough ideology and too little pragmatism at Westminster for my liking.

I spent seven years from September 2007 fighting the Conservatives of this Council for choosing a new, out-of-the-blue settlement between Elsenham and Henham. It was dumped by the Council at the end of 2014 by a planning inspector who agreed with me and my colleagues that "Hellsenham" was and is a poorly accessible place by road. That is in the past.

Since then, Cllr Janice Loughlin and I have been working along-side Conservative and Residents for Uttlesford councillors with our planning officers to come up with a credible plan. We have worked well together. There has been minimal political game playing. There has been some posturing and some necessary challenge along the way. I'm all in favour of challenge and scrutiny! Long may it continue!

We all surely know that the sooner we finalise a sensible and credible Local Plan, the less chance that local planning will be taken out of this council's hands by central government and we will be able to avoid an immediate hike in annual housing numbers to fall in line with central government's latest and much higher housing number formula. That could happen within weeks if we bottle out tonight.

The floodgates would almost certainly be opened to speculative applications across the district from large towns to small villages as developers are allowed to fill the vacuum. This is not a threat on my part. It is a reality that Uttlesford has already experienced, but probably not yet suffered to the degree that would probably be seen over the next five years if we get it wrong tonight.

I'm not prepared to behave irresponsibly to score populist, short-lived, party political points and newspaper headlines. Those headlines would soon turn sour as the situation backfired on all the people of this delightful district.

So I urge fellow members to stick with the real world we all live in and to confront some of the myths. I have had a robust exchange of correspondence only today with one of the Garden Settlement campaign groups. We have just agreed to meet in July to discuss our differences of opinion.

It has been argued that this Local Plan sets a housing target that is too high. Only this last weekend it was being suggested that the totals over the 21-year plan period should be dropped by around two-and-a-half thousand. But we know that the Government's new methodology for calculating future housing need, based on addressing housing unaffordability, (and which kicks in next month,) would PUSH UP our requirement by about the same amount from proposed levels. So immediately there would be a deficit of 4-5 thousand homes that would render the plan unsound.

We know we would be “gifted” the higher total if we bottle out of agreeing this Local Plan tonight. I can see no credible logic in fiddling down the numbers in such circumstances. Of course, to do so would be a gift to any developer who is eager to do his own thing without the a Local Plan.

There is still more than a year to go to the adoption of the new Local Plan. A perverse decision now to drop the housing numbers in the face of an eventual likely annual increase would be an act of recklessness that the electorate would not like at all when the penny dropped, as sure it would. The electorate would not thank anyone for unleashing several years more of total planning anarchy imposed from people who don't live round here. So, please, let's no go there.

It wouldn't “save” or eliminate a Garden Settlement. It would make more likely that we will end up with three sub-standard new settlements and lots more unplanned development in most of our towns and villages.

There would be less likelihood that the highest Garden Settlement Principles are achieved because promoters and landowners would be able to exploit the confusion to water down these principles, such as the requirement to build schools and other infrastructure for when the residents arrive. It would be like the old days; people first, infrastructure later - if we are partially lucky!

The Plan before us today is a vast improvement on what UDC tried to get through an inspector at the end of 2014. I want to take this opportunity to thank all officers and advisors, consultants, councillors and members of the public - yes, the public have helped a lot - for bringing it to this point of decision

In recent weeks the policy on Stansted Airport (SP11) has been strengthened at my request. It now commits the Council to resisting any relaxation of the controls on night flights. A statement about developments being in accordance with the latest throughput permission has been reinserted. Other improvements address public transport access for non-aviation users, especially uses by local people. Statements on climate changing emissions by aircraft are more explicit. Protections needed for the amenity of local residents and the environment have been bolstered. In particular, the airport owner is required to take responsibility for reducing the effect of aircraft on the area by demanding fleet modernisation by airlines.

I know that my Liberal Democrat colleagues will continue to press in all planning areas for measures that ensure real sustainability and for delivery on policies that protect our precious local environment, protect and enhance local heritage, even whilst recognising there has to be change. I know that other political groups will agree.

Speaking personally, I want to see more effort put into addressing local road congestion. Like many people, I am fed up with road congestion - and present roadworks chaos - through my own ward at Stansted Mountfitchet. This plan doesn't offer an obvious and immediate solution, even though there would be measures further north that should offset some traffic congestion in the south of the district. I will expect more focus on B1383 congestion in the next review of the Local Plan in only a few years' time.

Change always has its downsides, as does refusal to change. If, at the same time as change takes place, we demand that local features of value are enhanced, we just might ensure - or rather, we can ensure - a future district we can all be proud of.

I started by talking about the need for more housing. I will end with some thoughts on housing that is more affordable and available than now for local people - either to rent or to hold in shared ownership.

I am not alone in wanting to see Community-led housing created in this district. My Lib Dem colleagues demand it. Tory and R4U councillors are also passionate.

Community Land Trusts are springing up across the country. Crucially, Right-to-Buy legislation on council and housing associations can be avoided. These community trusts own land and provide homes to local people, and that would likely include local workers who presently live miles away. If, through negotiation with the promoters of the Garden Settlements, the trusts acquire land at low or zero cost, the prices (including rents) at levels well below market levels should be achievable.

An all-party working group under the council's Scrutiny banner is presently working up requirements that will help define in more detail what the Local Plan's demand for "40% affordable housing" should actually mean in detail. We know that a so-called affordable rent at 70% of full market-level rents still means that many people are left with too little money for the other needs of life besides a roof and bed. A report on that work is expected in September. The outcome will feed in to the detailed Garden Community negotiations going forward.

So, Madam Chairman, I urge my fellow councillors to vote FOR the Draft Local Plan tonight so that Uttlesford District Council can get on with the job without further delay.

Thank you!