

Development Proposals

Your committee spent a great deal of thought and time preparing the response from The Friends of the Forster Country to the housing proposals of North Herts District Council (NHDC). Public Consultation lasted just over six weeks and closed on 28 March 2013. Seven areas (strategic sites) in North Herts are each being considered as options for the building of more than a thousand homes over the next twenty years, in addition to smaller developments in towns and villages (non-strategic sites).

The seven sites to be considered were proposed by landowners and developers. The public were asked to respond in order to aid in the choice of sites as Councillor Tom Brindley (Portfolio Holder for Planning, Transport and Enterprise NHDC) stated that a third of them will need to be built on. There is a target of 10,700 homes to be built by 2031 in order to meet the area's expected future needs.

Six of the seven sites proposed lie in Green Belt land for which National Government had promised protection. Councils are specifically required to take into account policy constraints such as Green Belt in setting housing targets. There is concern that NHDC is being unduly influenced by landowners and developers and not formulating its own ideas. Large parts of North Herts, which may be more suitable, have not been considered.

Readers of this Newsletter will know that we have fought for many years "To preserve for all time the open green space to the north of Stevenage known as the Forster Country." So, naturally, our focus is the North Stevenage strategic site (Area 219). Members

were informed of the significance of the proposal and asked by us to complete their own personal responses. Our arguments will be reinforced by those of GASP (Graveley Against SNAP Proposals) as such a development would overwhelm that village and coalescence of Stevenage and Graveley would be unwelcome to us both.

Stevenage was planned as a New Town for 60,000 inhabitants. It has already expanded to 80 – 90,000 and is beginning to lose the benefits for which it was designed. The therapeutic value of green space and proximity to open countryside is undisputed and we do not want to lose it.

Hertfordshire is already the second most densely populated shire county in the United Kingdom and an addition of 10,700m homes would make it the first. Such an increase would be detrimental to the quality of life of current residents, particularly of the Old Town and Woodfield areas. There would be unwelcome new roads with increased noise and congestion and more stress on already overused water supplies.

Instead of large areas of new housing in specified limited areas creating mini-towns, such as we have in Great Ashby to the north east, every community should be required to build a small percentage of the required new homes – if, indeed, so many really are required.

It would not be advisable to create another new community straddling the boundary between two local councils. Like Great Ashby, the proposed development would adversely affect Stevenage residents, using Stevenage facilities whilst paying Community

Charges to North Herts. It would not help to regenerate Stevenage.

Development in North Stevenage runs counter to the council's own studies and publications. The NHDC website for Tourism and Culture states that the locality is mainly rural, consisting of countryside and small villages. It is designated as a Landscape Conservation Area. Views of the Chiltern Hills were recognized in the NHDC Landscape Study of 2011 whose guideline was to maintain the open character and long distance views of the area.

The strategic site pinpointed is 32 hectares yet this study stated that development over 5 hectares would be inappropriate. This is the only remaining farmland in Stevenage, historically important as the surrounding land of the original Saxon village of Stigenace.

Of special concern to us, of course, is the literary and artistic heritage of the area which has been encroached on and could be obliterated. E M Forster, Elizabeth Poston and Sir Malcolm Williamson all lived in Rooks Nest House and Forster immortalized it in *Howards End*.

Readers of local papers will know from the Letters pages that these development proposals are causing controversy. Stevenage Borough Council has yet to publish its own housing growth plan so our arguments will need to be repeated when they do, should they suggest a site adjoining that of North Herts, south of Area 219. The fight to save Forster Country thus continues!

Angela Hepworth

Birthday walk

1 January 2013 – a bright mild day was welcome after a miserable grey New Year's Eve. It was good to be out in fresh air under blue skies. We started off with a respectable twenty adults plus two dogs but a few, including our canine friends, dropped out early - intimidated by mud, mud, slippery mud. Sixteen completed the walk, taking somewhat longer than usual, most of whom then enjoyed conviviality over tea and biscuits in the Parish Room of St Nicholas' Church.

Grumble from one Committee Member who should know better: "Why didn't Mrs Forster rent a house on Therfield Heath? Then we could be walking on chalk rather than clay." One could as illogically complain that our man was born in January rather than March – when the clay stands a chance of being frozen hard – at least in 2013.



Photo John Spiers

Trustees

We long ago promised to publish the names of the trustees of FOFC. Owing to deaths and resignations, a new body had to be formed. The current trustees are:

Margaret Ashby
Stephen Pollock-Hill
Marion Ohlendorf
June Pitcher
John Spiers.

Patron speaks out

Sir Andrew Motion, in his role as Chairman of CPRE, has voiced his concerns about the damaging effect urban second home owners are having on rural life.

His views have not gone unopposed but it is good that the subject is being discussed in the light of proposed housing developments in many parts of our countryside.

Membership Renewal

Annual subscriptions to the Friends of the Forster Country are now due. We enclose a form for your completion.

If we are to achieve our aim

to preserve for all time the open green space in the north of Stevenage known as the Forster Country

we need you all to continue supporting us and trying to recruit new members to our cause.

Subscriptions for 2013-2014 remain at £7 per individual and £10 per family.

Forster Country walk

The Forster Country Walk will be opened on Saturday June 15th by world famous novelist, Ken Follett. The signage for the walk was made possible by a generous gift from Barbara Follett, our MP and friend for many years, in memory of John Hepworth.

The unveiling of the first signpost will take place at 2.45pm alongside the memorial gates of the Thomas Alleyne School, opposite the Bowling Green at the north end of Stevenage High Street.

This event will be preceded by a brief AGM which will take place at 2pm in the garden room of Springfield House, the other side of the Bowling Green, and followed by tea in the same venue.

It is hoped that many Friends will be able to attend this event. Should the weather be fine, a walk to view the waymarked path will be an option.

Patrons of the Friends of the Forster Country

Margaret Ashby. Nicola Beaman. Andrew Motion. John Pilgrim. Richard Whitmore

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