

WOOLMER GREEN PARISH COUNCIL

Notes of Meeting with Grant Shapps

Friday 25th February 2022

In attendance:

Grant Shapps accompanied by a staff member.

Parish Councillors Andy Gribble, Chairman & Sarah Hall.

Parish Clerk, Janet Pearce.

The Chairman outlined the Local Plan position in relation to Woolmer Green and showed evidence that under the current proposals the village would grow by 32% but if the windfall site of Entech is included, which has already been completed, the village would increase by 44.44% which appears to be disproportionate compared to other settlements. He said that the Parish Council had responded to consultations and engaged the services of a planning consultant, but this had made no difference and the Parish Council's views have been ignored.

Grant Shapps said he was frustrated by the examination planning officer who has rejected the proposal by Welwyn Hatfield Council to build 13,279 dwellings and is insisting the figure should be 15,200. He considered this to be unreasonable. Grant agreed that a 44.44% growth in Woolmer Green is very high. He also stated that if the plan for 13,279 was eventually accepted then that included the Woolmer Green Green Belt site.

The Chairman went on to explain that a further site adjacent to Knebworth, but within the Woolmer Green boundary, was opposed by Woolmer Green and Knebworth Parish Councils and the Borough Council but has been considered sound by the examiner. This site had been rejected because it would join two villages together. It is within the Woolmer Green boundary but was an extension to Knebworth and outside the built area of Woolmer Green.

Grant reiterated his frustration that the examiner is still insisting on a figure of 15,200. He said he had contributed to a government white paper and argued for stronger language to be included to protect the Green Belt and emphasising its original purpose. He stated that the housing issue cannot be solved by building in the south east. He said he also has responsibility for the Northern Powerhouse and has argued that if the north is promoted then the south should be compensated by having less pressure to build on its Green Belt.

The Chairman said it is not clear where the housing numbers come from, and Cllr Hall said that Brexit and the pandemic will have an effect on how many dwellings will be needed in the future.

Grant agreed this would have an effect. He said he had a meeting with the Borough Council planned for the weekend and was going to urge the Council to reject the current Local Plan but Borough Councillors are terrified of the consequences and fear any reassessment could see the calculation for housing need increase to 18,000.

Cllr Hall stated that any Green Belt development proposals would have to prove exceptional circumstances and Grant agreed, saying how much worse could it be, the current plan is

unsatisfactory. He said he hopes to convince the Borough Council to reject the Local Plan as it stands, fight for common sense and that it was currently the worse time to settle. He also stated that the windfall Entech site numbers need to be included in the Local Plan so that Woolmer Green does not start from zero.

The Chairman also stated that we are always told that infrastructure will come afterwards but it should be born in mind that Woolmer Green relies on Knebworth for services, including doctors, and that Knebworth is considered a village for growth with approximately 800 dwelling planned in the North Herts Local Plan.

Grant said that the cost of housing is also an issue that can only be solved by levelling up.