

Alton Neighbourhood Plan

Following the Full Council meeting last week, I thought it may be useful to set out some relevant information and answer some of the questions in everyone's minds. This is my individual understanding and view of the current situation. This may change as more information is available and my understanding improves.

Overall

Alton Town Council (ATC) remains strongly opposed to the Local Plan proposals for Neatham Down and to the overall housing requirement that is being imposed on the town. However, ATC has limited agency to change this so has to make the best of the hand it has been dealt. If we don't then everything will be imposed on us by EHDC and we lose any voice.

ATC has not approved the allocations in the Alton Neighbourhood Plan (ANP). The vote last week was for the ANP to be put out for final Consultation.

Timetable

There is an overarching process and timetable at work. This is set by the progress of the EHDC Local Plan. Their next step is a Regulation 19 Consultation. Before they can do this, they must analyse and consider all the feedback and comments from the Local Plan consultation earlier this year. The volume of feedback was enormous, and this is taking time. We don't have a firm date, but EHDC are unlikely to be ready for Regulation 19 before the end of the year.

If we want our Alton Neighbourhood Plan (ANP) to be acknowledged in the Local Plan and be effective it must be submitted to EHDC before the Regulation 19 consultation is ready. If EHDC have not received an ANP allocation, the next iteration of the Local Plan will include their own allocation of residential sites in Alton.

To continue the process the ANP must be put to residents as a Formal Regulation 14 Consultation. At the same time, it goes to all statutory consultees. The consultation period is 6 weeks, the responses must be analysed and considered, changes made, and the final version put to ATC for approval. Only then it can be submitted to EHDC.

We do not have the luxury of a lot of time!

With or without allocations, it is strongly in the interests of Alton, including Holybourne, to get the ANP completed and submitted to this timetable.

Allocation or No Allocation?

It is important to note that, following the Reg 14 consultation, things can be taken out of the plan but nothing new can be put in. So, for example, a site allocation can be removed but no new site introduced.

At the end of February, the Steering Group (SG) recommended to ATC that the ANP should not include site allocation for housing development. Why? The ANP is not just about site allocation. It also contains many other policies that would apply to future development, protect our green spaces, set design standards etc. The problem anticipated by the SG is that there are very few significant sites in Alton that can be allocated, and they each have very vocal and active local pressure groups. The concern is that if any of these sites are allocated, as they would have to be to get to the housing number needed, the ANP would not get the majority approval needed when voted on by residents. The result is that we would be without an ANP. This would leave us exposed to even more development pressure.

This dilemma remains - not include allocation and be sure of getting a useful ANP in place. Or include allocation and risk not having an ANP at all.

There was, rightly in my view, concern from residents that not including allocation would be an abdication of responsibility. At the end of February, ATC deferred the decision. There has since been a lot of discussion. Last week ATC resolved that the Draft NP, including site allocations, would be put out for formal Reg 14 Consultation but not before 14th September. A brief window of opportunity has thus been created in which residents can suggest alternatives to the allocations included. If anyone wishes to take advantage of this, it would be best to concentrate

on known sites already in the Land Availability Assessment. It is very unlikely that completely new sites could be introduced to meet the timetable for the ANP.

The main reason for supporting of inclusion of allocation in the Consultation is to make sure that there is full understanding and discussion of the proposed sites. There has been previous consultation on some of these sites but not in the context of all the policies included in the ANP. This is particularly important for South Alton where the comprehensive proposals have not been presented or discussed before.

The SG have worked on South Alton as the best long term sustainable solution for Alton. At present, it can also be seen as an alternative to Neatham Down – it is more sustainable, less car-dependent and gives infrastructure benefits. South Alton, in the form included in the Draft ANP is not needed to meet the current Local Plan allocation requirement within Alton. Some South Alton land may be needed to meet the requirement, but the SG has pointed out that piecemeal development of South Alton would not bring the long-term infrastructure benefits. If Neatham Down is retained in the Local Plan, South Alton can be removed from the ANP so that we don't end up with both!!

If a site is included in the ANP it can also include a policy about how that site should be developed. If the site isn't included there can be no specific policy attached to that site.

The draft ANP includes allocations and policies. We may not like them (!). We know what an ATC allocation would look like, but we don't know what an EHDC Local Plan allocation would look like. EHDC will be considering all the same sites including Holybourne and South Alton

What about possible changes to the Local Plan?

We don't have the EHDC response to all the objections to the Local Plan; EHDC are taking legal advice on challenging the housing calculations; EHDC have put out a call for brownfield sites. Why move on before we have the answers? Well, we don't have a lot of time. And Alton will always be the Tier 1 Settlement expected to take a major share of any allocation. Even if one of these factors changes the overall numbers in the District, the allocation within Alton is unlikely to change significantly. If Neatham Down is dropped from the Local Plan this could even result in an increase in the allocation required within Alton. We can consider the answers to these questions as part of the Consultation and adapt accordingly in the final ANP.

Other things

Brownfield sites are considered in the Town Centre Master Plan but are not now included in the allocations. This seems to be because it will be difficult to make these sites available and they cannot be relied upon. I am trying to understand this better.

Size of site is important. A scattering of small sites won't give the possible infrastructure benefits or the same potential for provision of affordable housing and alternative home ownership opportunities that can be gained from one or two larger sites.

Don Hammond

12th June 2024