

Comments on the Masterplan Framework Document for Rushden East Sustainable Urban Extension

My comments on this document are in relation to the degree to which the Masterplan Document (MPD) meets the vision, objectives and policies of the Higham Ferrers Neighbourhood Plan (HFNP). I was involved with this HFNP as Chairman of the Steering Group which produced it and the comments made are also fully supported by [REDACTED] the Vice Chairman of the Steering Committee.

I have looked at the on-line consultation pro-forma which is available for comments to be made but have decided that the format does not suit the areas where I would like to comment on.

1. The existence of the 'Made' Neighbourhood Plans for both Higham Ferrers and Rushden are noted in clause 1.2.7 of the MPD. This clause then states that the policies in these two documents are in accordance. As far as the HFNP is concerned that is not the case.
2. Following a lot of hard work and consultation with the Community the HFNP was prepared and completed relatively early on. This was before Rushden produced their Neighbourhood Plan. However, throughout the MPD there is regular reference to the aims, objectives and policies of the Rushden Neighbourhood Plan but no references to the vision, objectives or the policies of the HFNP. This is a disappointing omission.
3. The HFNP was started in Dec 2012, approved by East Northants District Council and the official examiner and finished with a successful referendum vote in Feb 2016. It was subsequently 'Made' and is now the approved official document for determining planning applications in accordance with development plan documents for development within the area of the HFNP.
4. The area includes all the land to the east of the A6 from the A45 to just beyond the John Clark Way roundabout and towards the east as far as the outskirts of Chelveston and Caldecotte. This is a significant area of land and greater in extent than the already developed part of Higham Ferrers.
5. There were no approved planning proposals for the Sustainable Urban Extension (SUE) at the time the HFNP was prepared but it was clear to the Steering Group that the plan we were preparing should contain definitive planning aims, objectives and policies for any extension of Higham Ferrers into the SUE. We specifically referred to this area as Higham East to distinguish it from Rushden East. Policy HF.H3 in the HFNP set out the policies for the growth of Higham Ferrers into this area.
6. There were 9 specific policies included in HF.H3 of the HFNP covering Higham East (Future Growth):

- Provision of a strategic green corridor to accommodate an enhanced pedestrian route through the Urban Extension (SUE) along the existing public right of way (UK2).
 - Provision of a safe and high-quality link across the A6 between this site and land to the East of the Ferrers School site connecting the existing Greenway and Footpath UK2.
 - Allocation of housing and employment land to meet the needs of Higham Ferrers residents.
 - Allocation of future community facilities including potential land for allotments and sports pitches.
 - Strategic landscaping to protect visual amenity and sympathetically accommodate new development within a greenfield setting.
 - Avoiding potential impacts on the Upper Nene Valley Gravel Pits SPA/Ramsar Site. Any potential impacts must be assessed to the satisfaction of Natural England prior to any development being consented. In the event that any possible adverse impacts are identified, appropriate measures must be agreed with Natural England prior to commencement of development.
 - Opportunities to protect and enhance existing priority habitats
 - Planning obligations will be sought in accordance with the Community Infrastructure Levy regulations for access management measures at the Upper Nene Valley Gravel Pits SPA/Ramsar Site. This will include the delivery of additional strategic greenspace to ensure no likely significant effects to this important site as a result of increased recreational pressure from development.
 - The need to demonstrate the promotion of sustainable transport through provision for walking and cycling and through provision for public transport penetration.
7. Only a small part of the large undeveloped part of the HFNP is covered by the current MPD. However, according to concept Plan Fig 1.1. in the MPD, the entire piece of land in Higham Ferrers is designated for new employment purposes only, nothing else, and is coloured purple.
 8. There is no land allocation for housing for Higham Ferrers residents just employment and there does not appear be any major employment area in the Rushden part of the MPD just employment associated with a local centre.
 9. The MPD describes “the two-neighbourhood concept” and goes on to say these would be mixed use, sustainable neighbourhoods one to the north and one to the south. There is, however, some confusion because it then states that the north neighbourhood contains the greater proportion of employment when in fact it is showing 100% employment - no mixed use there - and the Neighbourhood to the south should be predominantly residential - no major employment there but more mixed use than in the north.
 10. There is merit in the “the two-neighbourhood concept” because Higham Ferrers and Rushden are two very different areas with different histories, populations, character and culture. It would be reasonable to expect that the HFNP vision, objectives and

policies would play a significant part in the plan for the north neighbourhood but that concept as far as Higham Ferrers is concerned has been completely ignored by zoning it all for employment. It also brings into question the sustainability of an employment area without any housing.

11. A further point of concern is that undeveloped Higham Ferrers land to the east of the A6 rises steadily from 40m AOD near the A45 to around 90m AOD where it meets the Rushden part of the SUE. Much of this undeveloped land is higher than the existing developed part of the Town. The land, designated for new employment purposes, and nothing else, is higher in elevation than any other part of current developed Higham Ferrers.
12. So, the whole of the current planned development in Higham Ferrers in this MPD is for employment and is on the highest elevated land relative to the current developed part of the town. Where is the mixed-use concept stated in the MPD?
13. The concept plan has arrows on this employment land showing retained views to the church tower, one of Higham Ferrers lovely historic buildings. So, people busy in their employment buildings will have a wonderful view of the church tower (if indeed they have any windows) while many people in their homes in Higham will have views of employment buildings (generally large rectangular sheds) on the highest land in the Town, as a consequence of this MPD.
14. Most employment buildings these days are large, sometimes huge, rectangular sheds of little architectural value. Despite assurances in the MPD that it would not be approved what is still of concern is the possibility of employment designation B8 uses (warehousing and distribution) on a very visible part of one of the most historic towns in Northamptonshire. This would be against every vision that the HFNP Steering Group and the Community had for the future growth of the town.
15. Apart from 100% provision of employment development and lack of housing provision in the Higham Ferrers area of the MPD I comment on the other policy areas of the MPD as follows:
 - The MPD has addressed the importance of pedestrian and cycling routes. *We specifically included policies in the HFNP but note there is no arrow shown or connection indicated towards Higham Ferrers from the employment site. The nearest movement indicator from the John Clark Way roundabout directs movement to Rushden Town Centre. This is an omission that needs to be corrected otherwise Higham Ferrers will not be connected to this SUE other than by motor vehicles. This is contrary to an expressed policy in the HFNP.*
 - The crossings of the A6 at the John Clark roundabout are proposed to be “super crossings” at grade and it is stated are dependent on ‘calming’ the A6, reducing its speed. *These “super crossings” are of concern to me. I do not know of any other that have been installed on a major, straight road, dual carriageway on one side, carrying fast moving traffic in what appears to be a*

*rural environment. To me, they are a possible solution in a busy urban area, a town or city centre but I am quite unsure whether they would be the best solution for this location. I hope that cost is not the overriding factor ruling the choice of solution because lack of safety has a cost as well**

- *Parks, greenspaces and paths. The MPD has included some of the facilities that we requested in the HFNP in terms of parks, green spaces and paths. It is good to see that allotments and a cemetery are allowed for.*
- *Schools and community facilities. They have been provided for. However, there is no mention of a Doctors surgery or a health centre which I am sure will be necessary for the planned increased population and there is no indication about car parking provision which is a continuous problem and should be properly considered in any new development proposal.*
- *Hayden Road green corridor. No comment as it is all in the Rushden sector.*

In conclusion I would just add that it could be very helpful for those who are producing housing, employment and local centre layouts and for the planners who are approving them to walk round a number of similar existing developments. This should be done during the day, in the evenings and at weekends and assume for the sake of the exercise that they are old, infirm or disabled and wish to walk or use the footpath or are in a wheelchair or disability scooter. We did this when preparing the HFNP and it was very enlightening!


Chairman and Vice Chairman respectively of the Higham Ferrers Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group (2013 – 2016)

