

With the end of the Local Plan Consultation drawing near I have decided to pursue my exposure of the casual treatment of the health of North Herts residents by NHDC. I wrote in Speakers' Corner about the problems of air pollution suffered by the town of Baldock before the Eastern bypass was built. The prevalence of asthma amongst 5-16year olds in 1994 was 15% and was described as "near epidemic proportions" by a then local GP. Mercifully this figure has been reduced to 6%, almost exactly the national average at the present time with current traffic patterns. However right now air quality in Whitehorse Street and Hitchin Street Baldock, comes close to breaching EU standards. Any extra traffic will undoubtedly tip the balance.

This is all the more poignant considering the recent air pollution case won by ClientEarth against the Government in the High Court. ClientEarth CEO James Thornton said: "*I am pleased that the judge agrees with us that the government could and should be doing more to deal with air pollution and protecting people's health. That's why we went to court. The time for legal action is over... We need a national network of clean air zones to be in place by 2018.*"

So why is NHDC so determined not to consider the risks attached to air pollution in Baldock town especially when their Housing and Green Belt Background Paper notes that former site 209E (Priory Fields Hitchin) was considered unsuitable for allocation for exactly this reason?

As founder of the Campaign Against Continued Traffic Damage to Children I have to ask why is it that, as confirmed by NHDC Strategic Planning Department, no specific assessment of air quality using historical data has been undertaken at this stage of production of their Local Plan? All the data accrued by experts at the time of the Bypass Inquiry can be seen in documents held by the town Library.

NHDC know full well that Baldock sits in a valley and their own draft Air Quality Report of January 2000 itself recognised the topographic influences on the situation by referring to the "physical character of Baldock inhibiting good dispersal of air pollutants." Indeed the valley forms a bowl where diesel particulates and other pollutants collect. If traffic is increased by thousands of vehicles every day (using NHDC's suggestion of two cars per household 8,000 extra local vehicles is a modest estimate and many will be used by commuters) the concentration of ultra fine particles known as PM2.5 will go up accordingly and so will respiratory problems.

The question must be asked "Can Baldock sustain an increase in traffic through and around it such as that which will result from building 3,590 new homes?" When across the country there is a demand for cleaner air and diesel-free zones NHDC is planning to almost double the traffic and air pollutants in this small town with potentially devastating consequences for the population's health. It is the most vulnerable who will be hit worst – the very young whose lungs are more susceptible to particulate damage will be affected for life, and the elderly are also likely to suffer more severely than the average., including "premature" death. Air pollution can increase the risk of heart disease, stroke and even cancer.

At the time of the Bypass Inquiry Sir Oliver Heald, MP for North Herts, brought the subject up in the House of Commons saying "*The local pressure group led by Mr Gingell has for years been asking for fair, just and compassionate consideration of Baldock children who ... live against a background of heavy traffic and pollution.*" The NHDC's current approach to child health is hardly in keeping with this statement and considering that each child affected by air pollution will be likely to go on to cost the taxpayer more than the average person NHDC's lack of care will cost its residents dear in more ways than one.

Obviously there has to be new house building and Baldock must take an acceptable share but shoehorning housing into an environment already on the brink of succumbing to air pollution can be to no-one's advantage. I believe that NHDC's Local Plan for Baldock is inconsistent with National Policy as it flies in the face of government targets for tackling air pollution. It is unjustified as it is incompatible with their Air Quality Policy D4 and Policy SP6 Sustainable Transport.