

NEDRA (New Edenbridge District Residents' Association)

Summary of Public Meeting 16 April 2024 Rickards Hall Edenbridge

Overview of the Meeting and Key Points

The inaugural public meeting of the Edenbridge District Residents' Association (NEDRA) drew over 100 attendees, underscoring the community's engagement and concern for local issues.

The meeting primarily focused on the government's pressure on local authorities to meet housing demands by 2040, proposing the construction of approximately 10,000 homes in the Sevenoaks area, significantly impacting Edenbridge with 1534 new homes. This did not include plans already in place for building taking the number to closer to 2000 new homes.

Concerns were raised about the lack of visibility concerning the consultation, especially around Regulation 18, which many felt was poorly timed and communicated resulting in an exceptionally low response from Edenbridge residents, which was not necessarily indicative of the true reactions of the community.

The potential loss of greenbelt areas, infrastructure challenges, and environmental impacts were central themes. NEDRA also highlighted the importance of community involvement in resisting overdevelopment and preserving the town's character.

Additional topics included the state of local policing, the future of the Edenbridge War Memorial Hospital, and access to medical services, reflecting a broad spectrum of civic concerns.

The meeting marked a pivotal moment for Edenbridge residents, uniting them in their concerns for the town's future and laying the groundwork for active participation in local governance and planning processes.

Key Points

1. **Housing Development Plans:** The government's demand for new housing in the Sevenoaks district, including Edenbridge, with concerns about greenbelt land, infrastructure adequacy, and environmental sustainability.
2. **Regulation 18 Consultation:** Criticism over the timing and effectiveness of the consultation process, with many residents feeling excluded.
3. **Community Mobilisation:** The formation of NEDRA as a response to perceived threats to the community's well-being and the need for a collective voice in planning matters.
4. **Local Infrastructure and Environment:** Concerns about the potential strain on local infrastructure and the environmental impact of proposed developments.
5. **Policing and Healthcare:** Discussions on local policing levels and the availability of medical services, including the future of the War Memorial Hospital.

Agenda Items

The 2040 Local Plan

The discussion about the 2040 Local Plan during the meeting highlighted significant concerns and key points, both from the presentation and audience responses.

Key Points from the Presentation

1. **Government Pressure on Housing:** The local authorities are under pressure from the government to meet housing demands, with a target of approximately 10,000 homes in the Sevenoaks district affecting Edenbridge significantly.
2. **Regulation 18 Consultation Issues:** The timing of the Regulation 18 consultation around Christmas was criticised as well as the complicated nature of the consultation document, which likely led to low engagement and understanding among residents.
3. **Greenbelt Concerns:** There is substantial concern over the potential loss of greenbelt areas in Edenbridge, with the plan indicating a significant proportion of new housing developments being allocated to greenbelt.
4. **Infrastructure and Environmental Impact:** The potential strain on Edenbridge's infrastructure, including roads and medical services, and the environmental impact of the developments were major concerns.
5. **Need for Community Action:** The presentation underscored the importance of community mobilisation and involvement in planning matters to ensure that residents' voices are heard and considered in the planning process.

Audience Responses

1. **Questioning Landowners' Roles:** Audience members queried the extent to which local landowners were facilitating the proposed developments by offering land, indicating concerns over the motivations behind the allocations within the 2040 plan.
2. **Unaccounted Housing Developments:** There were questions about why certain housing developments already approved or in progress were not accounted for within the 2040 plan figures, suggesting a potential underestimation of the actual impact to Edenbridge.
3. **Perceived Unfairness:** There was a sentiment that Edenbridge was being unfairly targeted for a disproportionate amount of development compared to other areas in the Sevenoaks district, especially concerning the allocation of homes on greenbelt land. The fact that development had been baselined on the 2040 local plan in Edenbridge led some to question the point of the consultation.
4. **Concerns Over Consultation Representation:** Some attendees highlighted a lack of representation for Edenbridge in consultations and advisory committee meetings, stressing the need for more vocal and effective participation from the Edenbridge community.

5. **Call for Unified Action:** The discussion reflected a strong desire among attendees for a unified approach in responding to the next steps for the 2040 Local Plan, emphasising collaboration with the town council and the importance of community support.

These key points and responses encapsulate the community's apprehensions and stance on the 2040 Local Plan, underlining a collective resolve to engage more actively in the next steps of this process to safeguard Edenbridge's interests.

There were some additional presentations under the topic of the 2040 Local Plan, including infrastructure, biodiversity, and sewage issues:

Key Points on Infrastructure

1. **Aging and Inadequate Infrastructure:** The presentation emphasised that Edenbridge is a rural market town with aging infrastructure that is not equipped to manage the significant growth proposed in the 2040 plan.
2. **Impact of New Homes:** The addition of potentially more than 1,500-2000 new homes would create additional water runoff, exacerbating existing flood risks and further straining the already struggling road system. More traffic could lead to increased road damage and necessitate more frequent repairs.
3. **Need for Upgrades:** Before any new development proceeds, a fundamental upgrade to the town's infrastructure is deemed necessary to prevent significant negative impacts on the town's sustainability and quality of life.

Key Points on Biodiversity and Sewage Issues

1. **Biodiversity Concerns:** The presentation raised questions about how the development proposed in the 2040 plan, especially on greenbelt land, would achieve biodiversity net gain, a principle requiring that biodiversity be enhanced and left in a better state than before.
2. **Sewage and Water Pollution:** There were alarming concerns about the state of the river Eden due to sewage pollution, exacerbated by existing infrastructure challenges. Increased development would likely lead to more sewage discharge and surface water runoff, worsening the situation.
3. **Health and Environmental Risks:** The potential for increased flooding and pollution poses significant risks not only to human health but also to wildlife and the natural environment, compromising the well-being of current and future generations.

Audience Responses and Concerns

1. **Scepticism About Infrastructure Capability:** Audience members expressed concerns about whether existing infrastructure could support the scale of development proposed, questioning the plan's feasibility without significant investment in upgrades.

2. **Environmental Preservation:** There was a strong sentiment among attendees about the importance of preserving Edenbridge's natural environment and greenbelt areas, with concerns about the loss of biodiversity and natural habitats.
3. **Calls for Action:** The audience's response included calls for more robust action from local authorities and the NEDRA to address these infrastructure and environmental challenges, advocating for sustainable development practices.
4. **Seeking Transparency and Involvement:** Attendees sought greater transparency about the environmental impact assessments and infrastructure plans related to the 2040 Local Plan, emphasising the need for community involvement in decision-making processes and consultation with the inspector during Regulation 19.

These key points underline the community's concerns regarding the potential impacts of the 2040 Local Plan on Edenbridge's infrastructure and environment. The emphasis was on the need for careful consideration of growth impacts and ensuring sustainable and reasonable development.

Edenbridge War Memorial Hospital

The discussion about the Edenbridge War Memorial Hospital during meeting touched on both historical significance and future concerns, with inputs from both the presenter and the audience. Here's a summary of the key points:

Key Points from the Presentation

1. **Historical Significance:** The hospital was highlighted as a gift to the people of Edenbridge, representing a substantial community investment and a memorial to the fallen of the World Wars. It was emphasised that the hospital is at the heart of Edenbridge, previously as a healthcare facility and currently as a historical and emotional landmark for the town.
2. **Current State and Concerns:** Concerns were raised about the hospital being sold to developers and the state of the war memorials, which are reportedly languishing and not being treated with the respect they deserve. There was a sense of upset in the community over what was perceived as the loss of a community asset.
3. **Lack of Clarity and Consultation:** There was an expressed need for clarity regarding the future of the hospital site and the war memorials. The lack of consultation or clear communication about plans for relocation or preservation of the memorials was a point of contention.

Audience Responses and Concerns

1. **Questions About Land Ownership and Rights:** Audience members questioned the rights and processes involved in the selling of the hospital, given its status as a community asset and the land being originally gifted for the purpose of the hospital and memorial as well as the significant community investment into the site.
2. **Sacredness of the Memorial:** The war memorial's significance was underlined, with some emphasising that the entire hospital grounds should be considered a memorial, not just the plaques or stones. The importance of de-consecrating the land, if any

changes were to be made, was also mentioned, reflecting deep respect for the memorial's sanctity.

3. **Need for Proper Consultation:** There was a call for proper consultation with the community regarding the future of the war memorials and the hospital site. Attendees expressed a desire to be involved in discussions and decisions, highlighting a need for transparency and community input. Cllr Margot McArthur confirmed there would be due process and consultation at the right time.
4. **Concerns Over Memorial Relocation:** If the memorials are to be moved, there was a consensus that it should be done respectfully and with the community's input to ensure that the new location is appropriate and honours the memorial's significance, as well as assurances that no damage will be caused to the memorial during relocation.

The discussions surrounding the Edenbridge War Memorial Hospital at the meeting reflected a deep connection between the community and the hospital, not just as a healthcare facility but as a vital part of the town's heritage. There was a strong call for respecting the historical significance of the site, involving the community in plans, and ensuring that any relocation of the memorials are managed with care and transparency.

Policing

The discussion about the policing of Edenbridge during the meeting addressed concerns about local law enforcement presence and capabilities, following insights from the presentation as well as audience comments. Here's a summary of the key points related to policing:

Key Points from the Presentation

1. **Current Policing Levels:** The presentation highlighted that, despite the allocation of funds from council tax towards visible policing, there's a perceived lack of police presence in Edenbridge. This discrepancy raised questions about the effectiveness of police resource allocation.
2. **Engagement with Community Safety Initiatives:** The presentation encouraged participation in community safety initiatives, including Neighbourhood Watch programs, and Crimestoppers, to enhance local security and vigilance.
3. **Use of Digital Platforms for Reporting and Alerts:** The speaker advocated for the use of online platforms such as "My Community Voice Kent" for receiving personalised alerts and contributing to community safety discussions, though not as a platform for reporting crimes directly. Alternatives for reporting crimes were offered in the presentation.

Audience Responses and Concerns

1. **Scepticism About Police Response Time:** Audience members expressed concerns about the actual response times from the police, especially when considering that the closest officers might be stationed in towns some distance away from Edenbridge.
2. **Desire for More Police Presence:** There was a sentiment among the attendees for a need to see more police on the streets of Edenbridge. The lack of visible policing was perceived as a factor contributing to a sense of reduced safety within the community.

3. **Issues with Non-Emergency Reporting:** Several attendees pointed out difficulties with non-emergency reporting, including long wait times on the phone and the inefficiency of digital reporting methods. There was a call for improving these channels to encourage more residents to report crimes or suspicious activities. The presentation outlined some other ways to report non-urgent crime.
4. **Resource Allocation Questions:** Questions were raised regarding the allocation of policing resources and the decision-making process behind it, with a particular interest in understanding how the specific needs of Edenbridge are being assessed and addressed by the regional policing authority.
5. **Community Police Engagement:** There was an expressed desire for better engagement between the police and the Edenbridge community, with suggestions for regular meetings or forums where residents can communicate directly with local law enforcement representatives. The presentation outlined the PACT (Partners and Communities together) meetings held in Edenbridge. With the recommendation that these should not always be held during the day, and some could be held of an evening so that people who work could attend.

The discussion on policing revealed a community that is concerned about safety and the visibility of law enforcement in Edenbridge. While there is an appreciation for the police and the challenges they face with resourcing and funding, residents expressed a desire for more transparent communication and engagement with the police, improvements in reporting mechanisms, and reassurance that Edenbridge's needs are being adequately addressed in regional policing strategies.

Edenbridge Medical Practice

The discussion about the Edenbridge Medical Practice during the meeting focused on access to medical services, experiences with the practice, and the implications of the 2040 Local Plan on healthcare infrastructure. Here's a summary of the key points made by the presenter and the comments from the audience regarding the Edenbridge Medical Practice:

Key Points from the Presentation

1. **Access and Digitalisation:** The presentation highlighted the shift towards digital platforms for booking appointments and managing healthcare, noting that while this can be efficient, it poses challenges for those who are not digitally savvy or lack access to online services. Mitigations in place for this were not working well in some circumstances.
2. **Feedback on Services:** Positive feedback included instances of efficient service and care once patients were able to see a healthcare professional. However, concerns were raised about the difficulty of getting through to the practice by phone and limitations on when online appointment forms could be submitted.
3. **Concerns Over Future Capacity:** With the potential influx of new residents under the 2040 Local Plan, questions were raised about the medical practice's capacity to manage increased demand without compromising the quality of care or accessibility.
4. **Training Days and Service Availability:** The presentation questioned the impact of the practice's training days on service availability, seeking clarification on whether services were completely halted during these times.

5. **Information and Communication:** The need for clearer communication from the medical practice regarding services, appointment booking processes, and consultations was emphasised, especially considering changing procedures and feedback from patients who have been using the new service.

Audience Responses and Concerns

1. **Experiences with Service Access:** Audience members shared mixed experiences, with some praising the care received and others expressing frustration over difficulties in booking appointments or receiving timely responses.
2. **Minor Injuries Unit Availability:** Concerns were voiced about the limited operating hours of the minor injuries' unit, particularly its closure on weekends, which was seen as counterintuitive to when many would expect to need it most.
3. **Digital Exclusion:** Several attendees highlighted the issue of digital exclusion, noting that elderly residents or those without internet access find it particularly challenging to navigate the new online-first approach to booking appointments and seeking medical advice. Advice was given to call 111 as they can also book GP appointments if people are struggling to get through to the practice.
4. **Need for a Proactive Approach to Capacity Planning:** With anticipated population growth, there was a call for the medical practice and health planners to proactively address potential strains on healthcare infrastructure and services in Edenbridge.
5. **Interest in Participatory Forums:** Some audience members expressed a desire for forums or participatory groups where patients could voice concerns and suggestions directly to the medical practice, fostering a more collaborative approach to healthcare service improvement. A representative of the Edenbridge Patient Participation group said that they were filling this role. NEDRA will collaborate with them to get this message out.

The discussion around the Edenbridge Medical Practice revealed a community deeply engaged with and concerned about local healthcare services. While there is appreciation for the care provided, there are significant worries about access, the adequacy of infrastructure to meet future needs, and the importance of inclusive communication and service provision strategies.

What's Next

The "What's Next" segment of the meeting focused on future steps for NEDRA and Edenbridge.

Key Points from the Presentation

1. **Regulation 19 Consultation:** Emphasised the importance of the upcoming Regulation 19 consultation as the final opportunity for public input before the 2040 Local Plan is submitted. NEDRA aims to facilitate widespread community participation and a unified voice in the response to Regulation 19, ahead of the local plan examination by the planning inspector and to keep in close contact with both

Edenbridge Town Council and Sevenoaks District Council to ensure messages regarding Regulation 19 are heard in Edenbridge.

2. **Engagement with Local Authorities:** Stressed the importance of engaging constructively with town, district, and county councils to ensure that Edenbridge's concerns are addressed in the broader context of regional planning and resource allocation.
3. **Community Power:** As a case study, highlighted the success of the Hospice in the Weald's fundraising campaign, which raised £408,100, doubled to £816,000 with matched funding, as an example of what can be achieved when the community rallies together, when people speak to other people who do the same in turn, the message spreads quickly. This was used to inspire and motivate the Edenbridge community towards active involvement and support for NEDRA.
4. **Call for Membership and Support:** The audience was encouraged to join NEDRA, with an emphasis on the modest membership fees and the option for additional donations. The importance of broadening community support to amplify NEDRA's voice was stressed. Highlighted the need for more people to join NEDRA, especially to work with the Committee in organising community events, manage communications, and lead specific initiatives or working groups.

The discussion highlighted the critical path forward, focusing on the importance of engaging with the Regulation 19 consultation and the power of communities who come together.

Any Other Business

Key Points from the Presentation

1. **Open Call for Issues:** The presenter made an open call for any issues or concerns not previously covered, emphasising NEDRA's commitment to addressing a wide range of community interests.
2. **Future Meetings and Engagement:** Mentioned the planning of future meetings to continue the dialogue on various community issues, encouraging regular participation and engagement from residents either as members or supporters.
3. **Direct Action:** While there was a strong focus on formal channels of influence, there was discussion of direct action, such as petitions to highlight critical concerns if necessary.

Audience Responses and Concerns

1. **Traffic and Road Safety:** Several attendees raised concerns about speeding and road safety in Edenbridge. The representative from Speedwatch confirmed this is being monitored, however they need more members. NEDRA will collaborate with them to get this message out.
2. **Youth Engagement:** Attendees agreed that it would be great for more young people to be involved in NEDRA as the town is their future.

3. **Former Association Experience:** A representative of the previous EDRA, involved with the first Edenbridge District Residents Association, emphasised the importance of demonstrating broad community support to counter authorities' claims of the association representing only a minority. He highlighted the strength in numbers and wished success for the newly formed NEDRA.
4. **Interest in Web Presence Beyond social media:** An audience member suggested expanding the association's online presence beyond Facebook to include a dedicated website, catering to those who do not use social media and aiming to involve older members of the community.
5. **Local MP Involvement:** There was interest in the stance and potential involvement of the local MP, Tom Tugendhat, with respect to local issues and the association's efforts. NEDRA will make sure he is kept updated with activities and seek to actively engage his office going forward.
6. **Concerns About Local Infrastructure:** Questions were raised about how infrastructure, particularly schools and transportation, would manage the increased demand from new housing developments. There was a specific mention of the Skinners Lane development (Land North of Town Station Cottages Forge Croft Edenbridge) and concerns about provisions for a school potentially reverting to developers if not acted upon.
7. **Query on the name NEDRA:** There was query on the name NEDRA with the letter D standing for District as NEDRA only represent Edenbridge. Surrounding areas all fall under other councils or have their own residents' associations. However, NEDRA will be working and collaborating with surrounding areas and groups, and people from those areas work, shop and visit Edenbridge and are therefore likely to have a stake in its success.
8. **Collaboration with Other Groups:** Audience members suggested identifying and collaborating with other local groups, stakeholders, and associations to strengthen the community's collective bargaining power.
9. **Utilisation of Social Media:** There was a call for more active use of social media platforms to raise awareness, disseminate information quickly, and mobilise younger residents of Edenbridge.
10. **Organising Public Forums:** Some attendees proposed organising regular public forums and information sessions on critical issues, such as the 2040 Local Plan, healthcare, and policing, to continue to educate and engage a broader segment of the community.
11. **Transparency and Regular Updates:** A desire for transparency and regular updates on the NEDRA's activities and progress was expressed, with suggestions for a newsletter or a dedicated section on the association's website.

The "Any Other Business" segment showcased the community's proactive stance on a variety of issues, from environmental sustainability and youth engagement to support for local businesses and road safety. It underscored the importance of continuous dialogue and participation in community life, with a strong call for action, volunteerism, and collaboration to make Edenbridge a better place for all residents.