



RESPONSE TO HERTSMERE BOROUGH COUNCIL'S *PLANNING FOR GROWTH*

19 December 2018

Introduction

This is a response on behalf of The Barnet Society. Our Society was founded in 1945 to protect the Green Belt in and around the parliamentary constituency of Chipping Barnet. We have over 600 members.

Hertsmere forms our northern border, so we take a close interest in prospective developments there. Not only do most of us often travel through – and appreciate – Hertsmere's Green Belt, but an increasing number of Barnet residents work and/or shop in Potters Bar, London Colney and Borehamwood, and some of our students attend Dame Alice Owen's School or the University of Hertfordshire.

Our response is prompted by the three sites considered for new housing between Barnet and Potters Bar (section 5, sites PB1, PB3 & PB4). We begin with general comments about the Green Belt and housing before making specific comments on the sites themselves.

The Green Belt principle

The Barnet Society opposes development of the Green Belt on principle. Not only has it prevented ribbon development between Barnet, Potters Bar and other Hertfordshire settlements, thereby preserving their cohesion and identity, but it has saved lovely countryside north and south of the M25 for the benefit of residents, travellers and wildlife. Its openness has been enhanced by the lack of roadside development along the M25.

Having said that, we recognise that some development may be justifiable under exceptional circumstances. Unarguably today's housing needs across London and the South-East are exceptional, and we broadly accept that a substantial amount of new building is necessary. But much of this could and should be accommodated on brownfield sites. Only as a last resort should building on the Green Belt be considered – and then only in the least obtrusive places, and to high design and environmental standards.

Housing targets

Although we do not question Hertsmere's need for additional housing, we do question the overall quantity.

In Barnet we have noticed significant disparities between the Government Standard Methodology, the GLA Strategic Housing Market Assessment and our own Council's projections. We also have doubts about future projections of housing need in the South-East, especially post-Brexit given the likely consequent economic slow-down and departure of EU citizens.

We hope that Hertsmere's own target will be verified rigorously before any final decisions are made.

Housing distribution

We question, too, the distribution of Hertsmere's proposed new homes.

Although we are pleased that Hertsmere is considering a large number of possible sites, they seem unrelated to any wider strategy for the area's economic growth or infrastructural improvements, particularly public transport. Some outlying housing estates around Potters Bar and Borehamwood, for example, are already fairly isolated and lack local facilities. Any new development must be planned for the benefit of existing as well as new residents.

Housing density and form

We acknowledge that the higher densities becoming normal in Barnet will not be acceptable in suburban and rural Hertfordshire. In the interests of carbon reduction, however, it must make sense to build at significantly higher densities around public transport hubs such as Potters Bar Station.

At the same time, buildings should not be tall enough to intrude on the Green Belt. Potters Bar's existing big blocks are very visible and do not make an attractive precedent.

We generally favour higher-density solutions arranged along streets or around courts of no more than three or four storeys. Excellent examples have recently been built such as Newhall in Harlow. Close to Chipping Barnet's own Green Belt, Brook Valley Gardens and Elmbank both follow these principles – in quite different architectural styles, but both in keeping with neighbouring streets and with low impact on existing landscape.

Such densities are unlikely, however, to be appropriate right on the edge of the Green Belt, where buildings should normally be as inconspicuous as possible.

Garden suburbs

Hertsmere states that growth would be in the form of 'garden suburbs', but this a vague and misleading label. It could mean simply villas or semi-detached houses with gardens, without any overall vision, like most pre-war suburban sprawl.

As invented by Victorian and Edwardian planners and architects at exemplary developments such as Bedford Park, Hampstead Garden Suburb, and Letchworth and Welwyn Garden Cities, 'garden suburbs' meant mixed and well-planned communities. Fundamental to their success was their range of work, retail, educational, health and recreational facilities, built around excellent road and rail connections.

By comparison, Hertsmere's promise (in para 2.6) of 'supporting infrastructure including roads, shops, open space, schools and other community facilities' is not exactly a ringing commitment to creating integrated, memorable – and consequently much loved – new neighbourhoods.

Sites PB1, PB3 & PB4

There are several issues relating specifically to these sites.

1. Together they provide a magnificent green buffer between Potters Bar and Barnet. Not only are PB1 & PB3 virtually continuous, being separated only by the grounds of Dame

Alice Owen's School, they connect visually with the fields and trees of Bentley Heath, Dancers Hill, Wrotham Park, Dyrham Park and other stretches of Green Belt to create a panorama that is much greater than the sum of its parts. Its loss would be irreparable and deplorable.

2. The southern sides of these areas are dominated by the M25 visually, aurally and in terms of pollution. It already impacts adversely on existing houses on the southern edge of Potters Bar (though less so in the case of PB4, where the M25 curves away to the east). It would have a much worse impact on any homes or work premises built closer to it, which is unlikely to be mitigated even by dense planting screens.
3. By minimising – or abolishing altogether – the gap between Potters Bar and the M25, the town's distinct identity from the south will be lost. The Baker Street and Barnet Road motorway bridges would make dismal gateways to the expanded town.
4. The value of PB1 & PB3 is enhanced because they are currently in mainly agricultural use. These are working landscapes – with the visual charm that brings – which require large fields. Eating into them will reduce their efficiency and threaten the future viability of farming there. We risk losing their economic and visual diversity for ever.
5. In Barnet we already suffer from road and parking congestion caused at least partly by the rising number of commuters from Hertfordshire into London. Building new homes and workplaces near our border seems certain to exacerbate that.
6. New homes near Barnet are likely to be cheaper and more spacious, internally and externally, than in Barnet itself. They are bound to attract young couples and families struggling to afford property in our area. It would be bitterly ironic if much of Hertsmere's new housing ended up benefitting Londoners at the expense of its own residents.

Conclusion

As the South-East becomes more and more developed, the presence of open land, accessible to all, becomes increasingly vital, and its erosion must be resisted. We believe that sites PB1, PB3 & PB4 perform an especially valuable role in our mutual Green Belt, and we oppose their development.

If parts of the Green Belt have to be sacrificed, it must only be within the context of an imaginative and detailed overall plan.

Instead of just chopping off those bits of the Green Belt easiest and cheapest to develop, such a plan would start by affirming the continuing validity of the Green Belt principle. It would then ensure that sufficient and sustainable tracts of open land are linked together, physically and visually, to maximise their value as green corridors and barriers to development.

It would also ensure that any new developments are tightly tied into existing settlements with transport and other infrastructural improvements to produce benefits for existing, as well as future, residents and workers.

Without such a plan, Hertsmere risks the unintended consequences of generating land value and profits for outsiders at the expense of its own communities and beautiful landscapes.

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