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Standing up for Hertfordshire's countryside

Land East of A10 Buntingford

Ref: APP/P1940/W/22/3340497

PUBLIC INQUIRY

Interested Party Statement

by Chris Berry BA(Hons), Dip TP, MRTPI

CPRE Hertfordshire – the countryside charity

July 2024

INTRODUCTION

1. My name is Chris Berry. I am a Member of the Royal Town Planning Institute, hold a Bachelor of Arts with Honours degree in Geography from the University of London and a post-graduate Diploma in Town and Country Planning from the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne.
2. I have practised in both the public and private sectors for over 45 years and been employed by a wide range of organisations including local government, development corporations, planning consultancies and development agencies. Latterly I have acted as interim Chief Planning Officer and Assistant Director for a number of London and Hertfordshire Boroughs and am presently employed as Planning Manager for CPRE Hertfordshire – the countryside charity.
3. I am presenting this statement for the Inquiry on behalf of CPRE Hertfordshire. CPRE Hertfordshire acts to protect countryside in Hertfordshire and is active in supporting local organisations and communities to protect open spaces and rural activity from inappropriate development and environmental degradation.
4. CPRE Hertfordshire supports fully the decision of East Hertfordshire District Council with respect to the refusal of permission for the planning application which is the subject of this Inquiry. We also support fully the considerable local community opposition to this proposed development, the concerns of Buntingford Town Council and identify further concerns relating to the relevance of affordable housing, and natural environmental matters.

BACKGROUND TO THE APPEAL

5. The application (reference 3/23/1447/OUT) is for full planning permission for the development of 350 residential units and associated works and outline permission for further commercial development on the western edge of Buntingford. A previous planning application was lodged in 2022 (Planning application reference 3/22/1551/FUL) which is similar in virtually all respects.
6. The relevant development plan is the adopted East Herts District Plan 2018. The District Plan is presently being reviewed by the Council.

RURAL AREA BEYOND THE GREEN BELT

7. The land identified for this proposed development is designated as Rural Area Beyond the Green Belt (RABGB) in Policy GBR2 of the adopted East Herts District Plan 2018 (EHDP). The District Plan states (para. 4.6.1):

“It (RABGB) is a considerable and significant countryside resource which Policy GBR2 seeks to maintain by concentrating development within existing settlements.”
8. Policy GBR2 continues to list the limited types of development which may be permitted “provided they are compatible with the character and appearance of the rural area”. The present proposal is a large-scale speculative residential and commercial development which is both outside the settlement boundary as defined in both the District and Neighbourhood Plans, and the scope of the exceptions which may be permitted through this policy.
9. Accordingly, the assertion in the Applicant’s Planning Statement (PS) with the planning application that “the Site is not covered by any Local Plan designations but is described as being within the Rural Area outside the Green Belt (sic)” (Planning Statement paragraph 2.5) is incorrect and misleading. Policy GBR2 is a key policy of the adopted District Plan and the area affected is designated in the Policies Map.

FURTHER DISTRICT AND NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN POLICY

10. CPRE Hertfordshire supports fully the further policy objections raised by the Council and others to the proposed development. In addition to Policy GBR2 referred to above, additional policies in the East Herts District Plan, namely Policies DES2, 3 and 4. These policies seek to “conserve, enhance or strengthen the character of the district’s landscape (Policy DES2)”, and make further provision for the quality of any proposed development on keeping with the local rural character.

11. The proposed development, by promoting an unimaginative layout of standard units filling the site with minimal amenity space, despite the extensive supporting material promising “a high quality, innovative and landscape led mixed use sustainable community”, fails to achieve the requirements of Policies DES3 and 4 in this respect.
12. Further policy relates to the requirements for development in Buntingford, namely Policies BUNT1 and 2 which do not include an allocation for the proposed development. The proposals represent an unsustainable form of development with an inevitable heavy reliance on the private car to access employment, main shopping, leisure and recreation activities which are many miles away (Buntingford has no railway station) in larger towns and cities to which public transport is poor or non-existent.
13. The Buntingford Community Area Neighbourhood Plan includes well balanced policies for the local community area which specifically seek to maintain the rural character of the town and its surroundings. Policies ES1 to 9 provide a comprehensive demonstration of local community requirements in terms of future development which are not provided by this proposal.

HOUSING NEED

14. This speculative application for development comprises a substantial extension of the built-up area of Buntingford to the south-west of the town and is not required by the adopted East Herts District Plan to satisfy the Council’s objectively assessed need for housing. The District Plan allocates sufficient land for housing in the local authority area during the plan period and the proposed development is unnecessary to satisfy housing requirements in the District.
15. It is also appropriate to note that housing need is not related to conditions in Buntingford. The town has already provided housing considerably in excess of its share of the District’s needs since 2011.

CUMULATIVE IMPACT

16. Buntingford has been subject to a very significant quantum of development in recent years which has undoubtedly changed the character of this historic market town and the surrounding rural area putting massive pressure on local infrastructure and amenities. The town has limited employment, no railway station and the proliferation of car oriented housing estates exacerbates the pressure on local infrastructure leading to unsustainable and unnecessary development.

LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

17. A key characteristic of the designated open land affected by the proposal is the quality of the rural landscape and specifically the Rib Valley setting in which Buntingford sits. The harm arising from the proposed development to landscape and visual qualities is substantial including the contribution it makes to the countryside in the area affected, providing space for long established agriculture, wildlife and countryside recreation.
18. The site presently constitutes a significant gap between the western edge of the built-up area and the A10 which acts as an important transition from the town to the countryside setting beyond. Building up to the A10 in this location will set a precedent for future development up to and beyond the road corridor, with further detrimental impacts on the both the countryside and existing infrastructure in Buntingford.

AGRICULTURAL LAND

19. The land is in agricultural use, as noted in the Council's own landscape advice as being "coherent" and "interconnected, despite the obvious presence of the transport corridor". It is also likely that the land could be categorised by the Department of Agriculture as Best and Most Versatile and it is increasingly recognised that such land should be maintained in agricultural use for reasons of food security and the rural economy.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

20. The provision of affordable housing is cited as justifying the provision of housing in this location. A recent illustrative analysis of average house prices and average household incomes in the County by a CPRE Hertfordshire member (Affordable Housing in Hertfordshire, April 2022) indicates the present inability of market housing to address in any meaningful way the demand for housing by average earning households in Hertfordshire.
21. Given that the definition of affordable housing has become effectively irrelevant with regard to house purchase by an average earning household in Hertfordshire, it is inappropriate to promote affordable housing as providing justification for the use of Rural Area for development.
22. Whilst accepting that a proportion of households can find ways of affording the slightly reduced “affordable housing” prices offered, this is a general factor relating to housing provision. It is not appropriate to use proportions of affordable housing as supporting the case for unnecessary housing which is not supported by Local Plan policy.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

23. In summary, CPRE Hertfordshire supports fully the District Council in its rejection of the proposed development which is the subject of this appeal. The quantum of development proposed means that there would be very substantial harm caused to highly valued open countryside which is designated as Rural Area Beyond the Green Belt specifically to prevent the type and magnitude of development proposed.
24. For the reasons set out in this statement, the Inspector is respectfully urged to dismiss this appeal.