

Examination in Public of North Hertfordshire Local Plan (2011-2031)
Inspector Simon Berkeley BA MA MRTPI
6th February 2018
Baldock (including Bygrave)

Meeting written up by Carole Anne Brown for the Baldock Society.

NHDC was represented by Louise Symes and Nigel Smith and there were various consultants on hand.

There were 10 local representors as well as a representative of Greene King and Hertfordshire County Council representatives.

Those attending came and went throughout the morning but there were approximately 30 quite a few of whom were from Baldock including Councillors Muir, Weekes and Patterson. From the Baldock Society Committee: Carole Anne Brown and Paul Taylor.

The session was organised so that each site was considered in reference number order. For Baldock, the sites were BA1 (the 2800 unit site on North Road), BA2, BA3 and BA4 all of which are in Green Belt. During the morning, only site BA1 was discussed. The afternoon was for Hitchin so I'm not sure when the other sites will come up for discussion, if at all.

The points for consideration were:

- Are all of the proposed housing allocations deliverable?
- Are they justified and appropriate in terms of their likely impact?
- Are they the most appropriate option given the reasonable alternatives?
- The reason for using Green Belt land and the impact this would have.
- Justification of the proposed settlement boundary.

Each point was put to NHDC for justification. When all the inspector's questions had been answered, the representors were given the opportunity to speak. No new points which were not contained in their written submissions were permitted.

BA1: land off North Road, with 2800 proposed units.

It was confirmed that the land was available and that a planning application had been submitted by HCC. It was expected that the first 150 units would be complete in 5 years' time, at the western boundary, off North Road.

The inspector was concerned about the proposed bridge over the railway line and was insistent that a letter of agreement should be provided by Network Rail.

The junction at Royston Road/Whitehorse Street/North Road/Clothall Road occupied a great deal of the discussion. The point was made that it is difficult to re-configure the junction because of the historic buildings on two corners. The junction is at or near capacity with long waiting times at peak hours. The waiting times in off-peak hours was disputed with NHDC putting forward 3 minutes average. Some mitigation was suggested with the possibility of a double mini-roundabout or smart traffic lights to control traffic flow. It was hoped that the proposed new link road through the development would take traffic away from the junction. The inspector wanted to know whether the link road was needed before building work begins, who would be paying and whether this was set out clearly in the Plan. The response was that a contribution towards the road improvement / new road would be extracted as the site comes forward and that Hertfordshire Highways would do the work.

The Plan sets out the need for 2 primary schools and 1 secondary school but was not sufficiently clear for the inspector. The site is expected to generate 5.6 forms of entry but the secondary school could expand to 8-form entry if necessary.

The council affirmed that a community hall, GP surgery and local centre with shops was deliverable.

The **environment**: there were no preferable alternative sites available. Chalk grassland means that there is moderate landscape value / impact. The impact becomes greater the further north in the site that you go. It is intended to develop the site within the ridge line and to include sensitive landscaping to integrate into the rural character of the area.

Other **constraints**: Surface water flooding to the south, Ivel Springs Nature Reserve on the opposite side of the road, archaeological sites locally, wildlife corridor along Bygrave Road with protected species on site (corn bunting). It was intended that there should be off-setting of land elsewhere to replicate the habitat of the corn bunting. Historic England had raised concerns about retaining key views of St Mary's Church.

Green Belt: the land west of Weston way was mentioned which had been rejected when selecting site BA1 and the exceptional circumstances were stressed but not clarified (policy SP2). There would be a significant impact on the countryside but moderate effect on urban sprawl. The harm to the Green Belt would be reduced by means of structured planting and a planted boundary to the North and East of the site. The inspector queried the rationale for the boundary of the site and whether the Green Belt which was retained within the site but not included in the Plan for dwellings would be adequately protected. The response made clear that this Plan prevented building but it could be built on in a future Plan.

The representors

Philip Hills (Bygrave Parish Council)

He explained that all the land in BA1 was actually in Bygrave parish. The road would produce noise, light and air pollution. The on direct connecting route to Baldock appears to have been removed. The proposal for a roundabout on Bygrave Road means the risk of further traffic from Ashwell where significant development is already taking place.

Bygrave is higher than the development but little consideration appears to have been given to the impact it will have on the village.

Dr Andrew Wheen (about the link road)

There is severance between Baldock and the development due to the narrow railway bridge and the road junction. Although the new development will be part of Baldock, residents will have problems accessing the town centre. The suggestion that residents can walk or cycle though laudable is not realistic. The new road will become a short-cut running through the development and take traffic away from the A1M and the bypass. The link road suggests acceptance that the development can never become part of Baldock and will probably associate with Stotfold. The noise assessment shows that UN levels are generally exceeded and that noise mitigating measures will have to be taken with houses facing away from the road. The plans are against the National Planning Policy Framework and not in accordance with National Policy.

He also said that relevant information had only just been published with the result that residents were unable to comment on transport. (This was contested)

The two suggested mini roundabouts at Whitehorse traffic lights are no good for lorries.

Jim McNally (Baldock Town councillor)

He explained that the development was too large to be sustainable with a proposed 80% increase in homes from 4491 to 8081.

This would bring insurmountable traffic problems. The proposed link road will go right through the development. He suggested siting it to the edge as a perimeter road.

The southern edge of the development abuts directly onto the northern boundary of the town so a ribbon of Green Belt should be created between the two settlements by moving BA1 northwest and creating a new garden village south of Newnham Road. The owners of this land would work with NHDC to develop the site sympathetically.

In response to the NHDC assessment of traffic tailback at the junction, he said that it was almost 1 mile this morning at 07.30 and that this was not unusual at 11.30 (he had photographic evidence but not with him).

Steve Jarvis (HCC and NHDC councillor)

Green Belt: plans do not preserve the essence of the Green Belt to avoid coalescence.

Traffic: the model used put Baldock at the edge of the area and so fails to take into account traffic originating outside Herts. The link road needs constructing to remove traffic from Baldock and to enable new residents to access the town. This means it needs to be a perimeter road to avoid destruction of the environment in the new development.

Transportation: it is vital that suitable railway crossings are provided into town for pedestrians and cyclists.

This cannot be delivered without the link road so a 2 – 3 year time-table for starting is unrealistic.

Adrienne Waterfield (SRB)

SRB does not believe this is deliverable because safe and appropriate access has not been demonstrated. The junction does not function (significant delays) and the ideas won't address this problem. The link road won't alleviate the traffic problems associated with the new development. Access for residents and bypassing the town are incompatible. The aspiration that people should walk or cycle is admirable but cars will be used. Cars for access to the station will add further pressures. The station and access and parking need improving. There will be additional stress on the roads when people travel to work (into and out of Baldock). The extra number of cars will have a detrimental effect on air quality.

Other appropriate proposals elsewhere were refused and BA1 was selected and the number of units for Baldock rose from 490 to 2800.

This is not deliverable in the Plan period.

Rob Hemmings

He spoke at great length and this is a summary of what he said.

The Plan will irrevocably damage the social structure of the town and is not visionary. It risks Baldock becoming a dormitory town.

The housing needs have not been properly defined because NHDC relied on ONS figures and did not take into account the way that need fluctuates. It absorbs the unmet needs of Luton and Stevenage without question and does not consider the total impact of neighbouring Local Plans as a result of which there will be a further 8300 to 8800 new homes very close (Henlow Camp, Stotfold, Fairfield, Arlesey, East of Biggleswade).

There will be a negative impact of the loss of Green Belt on the environment and social cohesion. There is a serious water problem, flood risk, poor road infrastructure, air pollution and this is prime agricultural land. As well as corn bunting there are English partridges. The

chalk river has been dry for 2 years. There are only 200 in the world, many of which are in Herts and 5 of which start in Baldock. They are being diminished by extraction but should be protected.

The link road through the development is a safety risk.

The Plan has been driven by money so no consideration has been given to other options such as Weston Way and a garden village further up the A505 where there is a station (Ashwell and Morden) and a coherent structure as well as ground water and low-grade land which is not Green Belt.

Steve Baker (CPRE Herts)

He was pleased the impacts of the development have been raised by residents because they are almost completely absent from NHDC documents.

The scale of the area to be subsumed almost doubles the size of Baldock.

He questioned whether a landowner would make the commitment to provide an adequate habitat for the corn bunting, where this would be and whether it would be suitable.

The A507 is heavily used because it is one of a few East/West arteries. The junction is crucial to the success of the development and the problems cannot be solved easily.

BA10 is an industrial development which would provide more jobs for Stevenage and so generate more traffic movements.

The visual and landscape implications are significant as are the implications for Green Belt. The impact assessment has not been carried out properly by NHDC. A major opportunity is not a reason to lose Greenbelt.

This is totally out of scale with Baldock.

Colin James (HCC Urban Design)

Stations are often in the centre of a town and so this will be the case in Baldock.

The ridge line is a good boundary. The northern edge will become a country park.

Severance: the Local Plan addresses this by better access to both sides of the station, bridges and pedestrian and cycle connections.

Deliverability: Network Rail is in the advanced stages of an agreement and there is a realistic prospect of deliverability in 5 years.

Traffic: the road layout by the traffic lights is constrained but the new link road will create a more open road network.

Anthony Burrows (Save the World's 1st Garden City)

BA1 is agricultural land and a report from c2000 stressed how important it is.

The corn bunting is red-listed because it has reduced to approximately 10% of its population 10 years ago. Can we just shift a species? There are many more species not mentioned by NHDC.

Cecil Ball (Greene King)

The only discarded site mentioned was Weston Way when BA12 which was owned by Greene King was also discarded and should be reconsidered along with other sites that were discarded.

The NHDC response: it failed the test in the first stage and so was filtered out early because it wasn't considered suitable.

Sarah Clinch (WYG for HCC)

WYG have developed the current Baldock housing proposals which are now under consultation. HCC will be forming a housing company to develop the Baldock sites.

WYG are in discussion with Network Rail at the moment. A railway pedestrian crossing was mentioned.

Environment – WYG have undertaken several studies including drainage so that a strategy can be developed. Corn Bunting, birds, hedgerows, etc are in HCC plans.

NHDC Council replies:

All houses planned are needed, there is not over-provision

Through traffic is a problem and a link road will alleviate some through traffic.

There is no flood risk. Surface water can be sorted out.

I left at 13.10 and the session ended at 13.40 having considered only site BA1. The last 2 paragraphs were added by Albert Sillwood.

A further session was arranged for the week beginning 19th March to consider sites BA2, BA3 and BA4.