

HOUSING ALARM! HARPENDEN THREATENED!

'We devote almost all of the Summer issue of the newsletter to a **SPECIAL EDITION** on the house building crisis, beginning with a succinct summation of the current perilous position from Society chairman Chris Marsden:

The current situation is not encouraging. Despite strong arguments that there are no 'exceptional circumstances' allowing building on the green belt and persistent submissions that the Green Belt Review made significant errors which seriously affected the grading of site S5 (the NW Harpenden field below) in the Evaluation Matrix, these have been brushed aside. 'Exceptional circumstances' are being defined as the Government's need to build more houses in the area – a clear case of 'Catch 22'. Our evidence over distance measurements and traffic congestion implications

have simply been ignored. It seems that the planning officers are convinced that redrawing of the green belt boundaries is necessary in order to get the new strategic plan agreed by the government's inspectors and are not prepared to be diverted.

There is also a suspicion that they are pursuing a 'divide and rule' policy by choosing just four sites in different parts of the District as 'strategic', so that people in areas not initially affected will breathe a huge sigh of relief and accept the plan, not realising that they will be affected as more sites are designated 'strategic' down the line.



'WE OWE IT TO FUTURE GENERATIONS'

Harpenden Society News is privileged to feature this edited extract from the contribution made by Society member Joanne Whitehead (below) at the recent meeting to discuss the threat of excess housing development. Her concise and clear-cut talk was received with prolonged applause.



The single most important decision which local politicians will shortly take is whether and where to use Green Belt land for housing. This would affect all of us.. It's not just about the permanent loss of open countryside. It is also about the number of cars on our roads, the number of seats on our trains and the number of school places for our children.

There are three inevitable consequences of a Green Belt policy.

1. There will always be pressure - you don't have Green Belts around places like Taunton or Norwich where there isn't such pressure for development.
2. We have to think imaginatively how to accommodate more people on brown field sites within the Green Belt ring..
3. We have to accommodate people beyond the Green Belt. I would say this should be in a sustainable way, in new towns, or urban extensions to existing towns, or by making villages grow to support the pubs and shops that make communities work.

The coalition government made radical changes in planning law, and completely rewrote planning policy. It could have chosen to abolish Green Belt

policy altogether. But it didn't. Instead it firmly decided to retain Green Belt policy as it had been, saying, importantly, 'Green Belt boundaries should only be altered in exceptional circumstances'

The current legal framework means that critical decisions are now made on our behalf by local politicians. Don't listen if they try to fob you off by saying that these things are imposed upon them from above - they can and must make real choices.

Under current law and policy, there are three key questions for them.

1. Can we use our brownfield land more effectively?
2. Are there exceptional circumstances which make it necessary to change Green Belt boundaries?
3. Where, beyond Green Belt, should we seek to accommodate people?

This last is very important but is often overlooked. Councils with Green Belts now have a statutory 'duty to co-operate' together to solve these problems..

But the question they are actually asking themselves is: 'which bits of the Green Belt shall we build on?' - and even commissioned an inadequate Green Belt Review accordingly. It means that the decision as to how much Green Belt to release is not controlled by the concept of 'exceptional circumstances.'

It leads to the worst kind of cabbage patch politics, where the politicians get together and agree to build a bit in the south and a bit in the north, because that's so much "fairer" and we all get to "share the pain". But the result is that we end up losing more Green Belt than we need to. We must hold our local politicians to account. It's not nimbyism to expect them to make decisions for planning rather than political reasons, to tell us what the 'exceptional circumstances' are which make Green Belt release necessary and to require them to ensure that infrastructure is available.

I would say that we owe it to future generations not to allow politicians to do backroom deals or take the easy option. **Only then can we hold our heads up, and say that we are doing our best to hand to our children and grandchildren a world which is at least as good as the one we have enjoyed.**

The Harpenden in Question

being a series of editorial commentaries on important Harpenden issues that should challenge thought and encourage inquiry and action.

14. Housing Wants



When speaking in March at The Society's AGM in reference to the Independent Assessment of Housing Needs and Strategic Housing Market Assessment: St Albans City and District Council (November 2013) Councillor Julian Daly, the District's planning portfolio holder, said rather patronisingly to the audience, 'you would not understand it.'

There is some truth in this conclusion, in that the report is designed to obfuscate or, at least, blind with science, with its barrage of coloured diagrams, numerical tables, cumbersome jargon and sheer wordage. It is 317 pages long and weighs in on the kitchen scales at 1 lb 12 oz – my hardback volume of the complete works of Shakespeare manages only a puny 1 lb 2 oz.



Above: Eric Midwinter with the relevant documents and the complete works of Shakespeare

The report offered some nine scenarios and options for housing over the twenty years. 2012 to 2031. The District Council appears to have chosen the one that arrives at a total of some 8452 housing units.

However, in practice that apparently means 436 new houses or flats every year. Where, then, is the need?

There will be natural population growth and change over that time but the report argues that 'internal migration is the most significant single component of projected population change'. The figures are jumbled but the indication is that about a third of the required new houses would be for internal migration. Thus of those 436 houses, some 142 represent net inward migration, that is by how many the figure of prospective householders arriving in the District will outnumber those who leave; not replacements, mark, but extras.

The plan predicts that each year 142 more house-

seekers will come here than leave, so 142 houses must be built; the plan is adopted; the houses are built; the people roll up to live in them; the plan is justified. It is a win-win call for the planner, but it turns cause and effect around. If the houses weren't built, the incomers would have to go somewhere else or remain where they are.

It is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

It is largely based on the number of 'extras' who came here over the last few years – but that in itself is tantamount to the number of extra houses that were built!

I am indebted to the District Planning & Building Control office for its courtesy, promptness and efficiency in providing me with the startling information that the report cost, with VAT, something like £44,000, almost twice the current average individual annual earnings. What a pity Councillor Daly didn't have a word with me. I could have put him in touch with Gipsy Petrulengo on the Golden Mile at Blackpool who would have offered an equally interesting piece of fortune telling for a couple of quid.

This is largely a housing 'wants' assessment. All those people would 'want' not 'need' to come to St Albans. And two critical elements are missing. One is infrastructure. The other is employment opportunities.

So. Subtract a third, say, 142 houses from the 436 total, then it would be just 294 'needed' a year. It would be more manageable, with little if any need of the Green Belt.

From a professional perspective, I have sufficient doubts about the somewhat outmoded bases the report uses in terms of the effects of older age and younger generation employment to suggest a few more houses could be shaved off that 294.

Hang on. Watch out. We'll soon be back to the modest 250 a year of the derided draft Core Strategy Plan...which we would be delighted to accept. Better to have turned for advice to my lighter weight Swan of Avon, as in Henry IV Part II:

**When we mean to build
We first survey the plot, then draw the model;
And when we see the figure of the house,
Then we must rate the cost of the erection;
Which if we find outweighs ability,
What do we then but draw anew the model
In fewer offices, or at last desist
To build at all?**

Eric Midwinter

Plans, Plans, Plans

By our roving correspondent

On Thursday 12th June The Society organised a public meeting about our District Council's new Strategic Local Plan (SLP). It is a potentially vexing topic, as when the SLP is finalised it will control new building in our District for the next 20 years. The meeting was held in the conference hall at Rothamsted and every one of the 200 seats had been booked.



Julian Daly (above) newly elected leader of SADC and holder of its planning portfolio, laid out for the people of Harpenden why we need an SLP, how SADC gets one, what an SLP does and what constraints SADC faces. Joanne Whitehead from the Harpenden Green Belt Association (HGBA) said where they think SADC is in danger of going wrong (see page 2) and our chief local builder Mike Peters of Jarvis spoke up for the builders.

It was the first public occasion where SADC has been able to describe how their SLP is taking shape. The Society has been trying to get the meeting organised for a year now, and it is good that SADC are closer to taking key decisions on the SLP. The HGBA attends all the meetings of SADC's planning policy committee and has read the consultants' reports prepared for the draft SLP.

Questions from the floor showed that residents are very bothered about the way that infrastructure constraints are affecting life in the town, and may get worse. These include water, primary and secondary schools, roads, parking, seats on the train and waiting time to see the doctor. Others agreed with the HGBA speaker and expressed doubts about the process used by SADC in developing its SLP.

Our chairman Chris Marsden controlled the meeting with his usual flair and good humoured efficiency, and in order to get a steer for The Society put this resolution:

Firstly, The Society will press strongly that any green belt released for housing development should satisfy the 'exceptional circumstances' criterion in the National Policy Condition, and

Secondly, The Society will press SADC to ensure that its 'defensible position' includes full recognition of the infrastructure implications of any proposed development and a commitment to the provision of adequate resources to deal with those implications in a way that is acceptable to the community.

This was passed unanimously, so watch this space! There are exciting times ahead.

Please add your voice to those who spoke up so resolutely at the public meeting in defence of the social perils facing the whole of the District should these ill-conceived plans go ahead. Put simply, houses that are unneeded are to be built on the wrong sites even if they were needed... Write to your District Councillor now. A full list is available on the Harpenden Town Council web site: <http://www.harpenden.gov.uk/councillors>



INFRASTRUCTURE INSPECTED

One of the principal arguments against major house building in Harpenden is that its services and amenities have chiefly reached saturation point with little margin for improvement even were the money and the will available. Here are a few vital statistics to bear in mind.

- there are 22,500 vehicles in Harpenden that undertake 9m journeys a year
- we have two extremely busy highway; the B653 and the A1031, the latter of which alone has an estimated 11.4m vehicles passing through the town, that's one every four seconds at peak times.



The town offers very few employment opportunities, deemed by many commentators to be very important for new building projects. 87% of Harpenden's work-force commutes out of the town; 65% by car and 22% by train, with others driving into the town to swell the ranks of the 3000 daily rail commuters on already crowded trains.



The primary and secondary schools are massively oversubscribed.

Harpenden's population is 30,000 plus yet the three G.P. practices have 55,000 patients on their lists, drawing on settlements outside the town and there is no capacity at any of them for extra facilities.

- there are three mid-sized supermarkets in the town, all very busy and suffering from limited parking space.

The Herts County Council announced in 2013 that 'it is likely that the current water supply cannot sustain greater demand.'

- 500 new houses/flats means roughly 1200 more cars and other vehicles
- 500 new house/flats means 210 more primary children, that is some eight classes, over half the normal two-form entry infant and junior school; and 190 secondary pupils, that is over a full year intake for the usual six-form entry secondary school



We are, you might say, at bursting point...apart from the water, of course...

MEMOS FOR MEMBERS

SOCIETY MEETING

HEALTH MATTERS...IT REALLY DOES

7.30 pm Thursday 6 November at Park Hall,
Leyton Road

An opportunity to be informed on a couple of important health issues. Because we are trying to cover two topics, please note refreshments will be available from 7.00 p.m to enable us to begin at the earlier time of 7.30 p.m.

PATIENTS' EXPERIENCE AND EXPECTATIONS

What do you think will happen and what does happen after major illness or illness?

Hilary Thomas Professor of Health Care Research in Primary Care and Community Care, University of Hertfordshire

THE NHS CARE.DATA SCHEME; FOR OR AGAINST

The Care.data scheme will require G.P.s to transfer patients' medical records to a central data base controlled by the Health and Care Information Centre. Phil Booth of Medconfidential and Dr Ros Taylor

Please send comments on any issue raised in this edition to the editor:

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Visit the Society's website –

www.harpendsociety.org

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COULD YOU GIVE A HELPING HAND AT THE LIBRARY?

A Message from Liz Trounce, our Library Volunteers Organiser

'Following the great success of the first six months of our Library Project we would like to recruit one or two more volunteers to join the team keeping Harpenden Library open on Wednesday afternoons. It could be for you if you are interested in books, enjoy helping people and value the Library in our town. Get in touch with me, Liz Trounce for further details at library@harpendsociety.org



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