

**North Herts District Council Local Plan 2011-2031
Preferred Options Paper: Response from Sir Oliver Heald MP for North
East Hertfordshire**

1. Introduction

The need for development in North Hertfordshire is unarguable. It is an area of the country with an economy that is growing strongly. Over the period from 2011-2031 it is clear that many more homes will have to be built to meet the housing need and the growth in jobs. The Council has undertaken extensive research and the Office for National Statistics has produced figures which suggest that 12,100 dwellings are needed in the period. The Council has also made an allowance in respect of Luton growth.

The proposals are that 60 per cent of the dwellings should be sited in Green Belt, despite the requirement that such use should be “exceptional” and that almost two-thirds of the District is not in the Green Belt. In this response, I propose a two stage approach aimed at minimising loss of Green Belt. A better approach would be to have a plan for the first 10 years from 2011-2021 during which brownfield, non-contentious and mainly non-Green Belt sites are developed. In the second ten years, the Council should redouble its efforts to protect the Green Belt by identifying and securing a suitable site for a new garden city style development to take up a substantial part of the remaining balance of dwellings required. Given that 12,100 homes is the estimated need over the period, this would mean that 6,050 would be built in the first 10 years. Planning permissions have already been granted for over 2,600 homes, leaving a requirement of 3,450 or thereabouts by 2021.

2. Spatial Strategy

The spatial strategy does not distribute growth evenly across the district and fails adequately to take account of the possibilities of developing a garden city style development to provide a very significant number of the dwellings in question. I understand that there have been discussions with

neighbouring authorities and investigations of sites within the district, which might yield such a site, but due to the time pressure to produce a Local Plan, agreement has not been reached and so the plan proposes a predominance of development in Green Belt sites.

3. Presumption in Favour of Sustainable Development

The National Planning Policy Framework states that the purpose of the planning system is to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development with its three dimensions – economic, social and environmental. Development should support the local economy, provide social benefits in the form of new homes and community facilities and protect and enhance the natural unbuilt environment.

The main sites identified in the Local Plan are not close to the engines of economic growth in the district and diminish the natural environment.

4. Policies – Garden City principles

The North Herts district is the home of the World's First Garden City and it should be a policy for the master plan for each substantial development to be in accordance with garden city principles. This will embed them for the future and enable North Hertfordshire to continue to promote its most famous feature, namely Letchworth Garden City and the principles which underpin it. These include the long term stewardship of the estate. It involves high quality imaginative design including homes with gardens. It includes other features such as:-

- Mixed tenure homes affordable for ordinary people
- A strong jobs offer with a variety of employment within the garden city and easy commuting
- Generous green space linked to the wider countryside
- Access to strong local cultural, recreational and shopping facilities
- Integrated transport
- Local food sourcing, including allotments

5. Policies – local connection

North Herts is an area of high housing costs. My constituents consistently raise concerns about how their children will be able to afford to continue living in their home area. Consideration should be given to how this can be achieved. One possibility would be to extend to towns the local lettings arrangements currently used in village schemes. Any social housing (affordable rent) and shared ownership would be subject to a local connection criteria via the S106 in any case – but this does not apply to market sales.

However, a landowner could choose to make preferential arrangements available to people with a local connection, either when purchasing outright or through shared ownership/equity share. This would not be enshrined in the S106 and would be because of the wishes of that landowner. It could work by borrowing from current shared ownership arrangements and merging these with the government Help to Buy equity share model. Selection criteria would be subject to equalities' law and transparent.

This might mean, by way of example, a local applicant who was priced out of, say, a £250,000 first time buy could be allowed to buy a minimum 25% share and then pay rent on 50%. Alternatively, they might buy a larger share and defer any rent on the unsold element for, say, 5 years. There are lots of possible scenarios to make it work.

In either version the landowner would retain an equity in the property and share in any proceeds of sale. At the same time they would receive no initial return other than capital growth (or loss) for, say, 5 years. If after 5 years and no outright purchase, the applicant would begin to pay rent or interest on the unsold equity. A Housing Association would be able to model this properly and make it viable, without relying on too many assumed scenarios.

I hope the Local Plan might facilitate such arrangements, which develop the Garden City principles of long term stewardship, mixed tenure and affordability.

6. Green Belt Considerations

The North Herts district has a considerable amount of Green Belt and other designations. Green Belt should only be used for development in exceptional circumstances and the designation is there for important reasons of protection. Its purposes are:

- To check unrestricted growth
- To prevent neighbouring towns from merging
- To safeguard the countryside from encroachment
- To preserve the setting and special character of a historic town
- To assist urban regeneration by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land
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Within North Herts there is clearly a premium on finding a site which is not in the Green Belt and which provides for a substantial number of the dwellings required. This has proved difficult to achieve. However, if the Council were to concentrate on drawing up a plan for the first 10 years from 2011-2021 utilising brownfield, non-contentious and mainly non-Green Belt sites, it would allow time for greater focus on the second 10 year period. It should be possible in that time to identify and secure a suitable site not in the Green Belt for a new garden city style development to take up a substantial part of the required dwellings. If 12,100 homes are needed over a 20 year period, this would mean that 6,050 would be required for the first 10 years. Planning permissions have already been granted for over 2,600 homes, leaving a requirement of 3,450 or thereabouts by 2021. This reduces the pressure to rush to develop significant Green Belt sites.

7. The Proposal for East of Baldock

The proposal for East of Baldock is to build a suburb of Baldock with 2,800 houses in it, in effect doubling the size of Baldock and leading to a ribbon of development from the new suburb to Baldock, to Letchworth, to Hitchin creating unrestricted sprawl. It also ensures that there is encroachment into the countryside and spoils the setting and special character of the historic town of Baldock, which dates back to medieval times and has a strong connection with the Knights Templar. To one side it already has a close connection to the Letchworth Garden City and it seems that by doubling the size of the town to the east this will damage the setting of Baldock in its natural basin with countryside around. By building on this particular site the purpose of the Green Belt in assisting urban regeneration is also undermined by discouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land in the district. Part of the land is Bygrave Common and developing it detracts from the setting of the village of Bygrave, particularly the Upper Village.

It is also important to bear in mind that the land to the east of Baldock is an attractive landscape, it is full of nature and it provides outdoor amenity and recreation for people in Letchworth as well as Baldock. The site is just too big – an overdevelopment – and out of scale with the existing town.

There is also the important point about access to the site. The Plan proposes that this new housing development would require building a road bridge over the railway as the main access to the new houses.

I have contacted Network Rail regarding their involvement in the planning process. They have two departments which are likely to have an interface with any such development – Town Planning and Asset Protection. They have checked with both of these departments and, as yet, they are unaware of the proposal.

Their advice is for the Council to contact them as soon as possible.

Their Asset Protection team gives advice and support for outside parties who are planning activities that interface with the rail network. The team would consider whether an overbridge (road over rail) meets their requirements and this would depend inter alia upon non-disruptive access over the railway and no conflicts with any other schemes. It is also based upon the assumption that there are clear responsibilities agreed for future ownership and maintenance.

It seems surprising that the largest proposed site in the District is a “preferred option”, when it has not been established that there is an available access to it.

If the Council were to proceed with a two stage approach with a plan for the first 10 years relying on brownfield and other non-contentious and mainly non-Green Belt sites, this would ensure that they use their best endeavours to regenerate. It would also ensure that serious efforts were made to find a new settlement and that Green Belt land was only used in exceptional circumstances.

8. Letchworth North

Concerns have been raised about the development to the north of Letchworth Garden City on the grounds that that is also in the Green Belt. The Council will want to consider the extent to which that site should be used. It might be possible to create a small village style development, as some have suggested, separate from the Grange Estate and with its own access. Some constituents have raised with me concerns about increased traffic through existing residential areas. Some say that any development should not lead to loss of allotments and other open features. I understand that Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation are prepared to develop the site north of Letchworth on garden city lines and if it is to be developed I hope it will be possible to have a master plan which involves garden city

principles. There would also need to be careful thought given to appropriate access.

9. Letchworth Buffer Strip Site LRT6 Radburn Way

When the Council's predecessor was in the process of obtaining its CPO for the Jackmans Estate, objections were made and at the CPO Inquiry it was agreed that this site would be a buffer strip between the development and the rear of the houses in Baldock Road. Residents have shown me correspondence which shows this and I have corresponded with the Council about this. Mr Wearmouth explains this in his submissions to the Council and I support his arguments.

10. Ashwell – Claybush Road

This site is at the top of the hill and very prominent and imposes itself on the village. It is outside the village boundary and a revision to include it is not justified. Objectors argue that since April 2014, enough planning permissions have been granted to meet the village's requirement and that, in any event, the proposal for Claybush Road does not fit in with the emerging neighbourhood plan. If a site is to be developed, it should be in the village.

11. Implications if two stage process not pursued

If it is not possible to deal with the plan on the basis of a plan for the first 10 years and a search for a suitable garden city site, then in my view the Green Belt needs to be protected and the overall number of properties to be built needs to be reduced to reflect the constraints on the land in the district. I would therefore suggest that the overall number should be reduced by at least 2,000 to enable the important Green Belt features to the east of Baldock and elsewhere in the district to be recognised.

Finally, I recognise that the North Herts District Council has a very difficult job. There is strong housing need and yet a significant proportion of the land in the district is constrained. Some argue that North Herts district should simply give up on growth, but this would be against the interests of my constituents and the strong businesses which have developed in North Hertfordshire over recent years. I therefore hope it will be possible to change the plan to deal with the first 10 years and then try to find a suitable site for a garden city style development to take up most of the remaining numbers.

SIR OLIVER HEALD MP NORTH EAST HERTFORDSHIRE

January 2015