

THE HITCHIN SOCIETY

Objection to proposed westwards expansion of Hitchin North Hertfordshire District Council - Local Development Framework Core Policy F: Provision and distribution of new housing.

1. Lack of proportionality in dwelling numbers

Excluding provision for the expansion of Stevenage, and a possible expansion of Luton, the preferred policy wording calls for the provision of sufficient land for 6200 dwellings to be completed in the District between 2001 and 2021. This total includes 1964 that have been completed in 2001 to 2006 and a further 3209 to be accommodated on previously developed land in the four towns and identified villages. This leaves just 1027 dwellings to be located on greenfield sites outside existing settlements.

The preferred policy identifies greenfield land outside the boundaries of each of the four towns, possibly to give the impression of equality of treatment of each town in North Hertfordshire. This is reinforced by the way in which each town is required to accept just one principal area of greenfield development beyond the settlement boundaries. However, this seemingly equitable approach fails to take account of the distribution of completions in 2001 to 2006 taken together with the forecast number of dwellings to be accommodated on brownfield sites within the four towns and identified villages, as shown in the table below.

Settlement	Completions 2001-2006	Brownfield est. Completions 2006-2021	Total estimated 2001-2021	Percentage of Total 2001-2021
Baldock	132	133	265	5.1%
Hitchin	516	1765	2281	44.1%
Letchworth	207	579	786	15.2%
Royston	778	408	1186	22.9%
Villages	331	324	655	12.7%
Total	1964	3209	5173	100.0%

This table (all data from NHDC documentation) shows that Hitchin is forecast to provide 44.1% of all new dwellings in the period 2001 to 2021 excluding the small number to be provided on greenfield sites beyond settlement boundaries. In the case of forecast brownfield completions 2006 to 2021, this rises to no less than 55.0%.

This is in stark contrast with the stated preference for proportionate growth in the location of new dwellings, as in paragraph 5.28. ***The number of households in Hitchin at the start of planning period 2001-2021 was only 24.2% of the District total (NHDC data for 2001).*** It is essential that the percentages of new housing allocations are compared with this starting point. The highly disproportionate allocation of new housing to Hitchin at the very least calls into question the appropriateness of allocating still more housing provision to Hitchin in the form of greenfield extensions to the town.

Such an extension is, however, proposed in the Preferred Policy wording which specifies development outside the settlement boundary of Hitchin “principally to the west ... but not breaching the ridge line west of Lucas Lane and Crow Furlong”. The number of dwellings which could be accommodated within this area has been variously estimated as between 83 and 300, or even more, depending on precise boundaries and density. Even taking the lower

estimate, this would raise the total housing allocation to Hitchin 2001-2021 to 2364 dwellings, or 38% of the District total of 6200 (excluding the expansion of Stevenage, and a possible expansion of Luton), while an estimate of 300 new dwellings would take the allocation to Hitchin to no less than 2581 or 41.6% of the District total.

This is so far out-of-line with any application of the principle of proportionality (which was the most favoured method of accommodating growth), that the allocation of even 83 additional dwellings to Hitchin appears to be driven by nothing more than a requirement for all four towns to have some greenfield expansion, even if only of a tokenistic nature. If the number of new dwellings at this location were to be 300 or even more, this would no longer be a token expansion, but one that drives the Hitchin allocation to even higher levels of disproportionality.

Without any greenfield expansion to Hitchin, the 2001-2021 total of 2281 new dwellings would still represent 36.8% of the District total, far in excess of any concept of proportionality to the number of households at the start of the process, which was 24.2% of the District total.

On this basis alone, it is argued that the external greenfield expansion of Hitchin is unjustified against the stated criteria, and will exacerbate the pressure already felt on infrastructure arising from an already disproportionately high number of new dwellings in the town.

2. Disproportionate loss of amenity

The proposed external expansion of Hitchin is inappropriate, as the loss of amenity which would be experienced by a significant part of the population of Hitchin far outweighs any benefit that would be derived from the number of new dwellings. The present easy access to open countryside, including the Oughtonhead Common Nature Reserve, provides opportunities for healthy exercise, the importance of which is now increasingly recognised. In this context, it is also noted that a substantial part of the land in question is now used as playing fields. Even if it is intended that new sporting facilities would eventually be created elsewhere in the District, there would be a real and significant loss of amenity to the western part of Hitchin, where it could be argued there is a need for preserving and enhancing the existing level of recreational provision. Indeed, the cricket club and Bluehearts are more than just recreational provision; they are an important part of the fabric of the town.



3. Topographical considerations

The preferred policy describes the proposed development as “not breaching the ridge line west of Lucas Lane and Crow Furlong” as if there is a distinct ridge which would in some way hide the development as seen from the open countryside beyond. The reality is that the area west of Lucas Lane and Crow Furlong is essentially a level plateau ending in a minor escarpment beyond which the land drops sharply away to the west. Any housing built on the plateau would inevitably be highly visible from the west, as it is highly unlikely that it would be restricted to single-storey dwellings with a high standard of landscaping as in the case of the Cheshire Homes building. The concept of a ridge which would hide the development is highly misleading in the context of the impact of the proposed development, and should not form any part in the argument for development at this location.



4. Unnecessary due to further windfall brownfield sites

The relatively small housing gain from the proposed extension needs to be seen in the context of the continuing availability of unexpected or ‘windfall’ development sites in Hitchin. Just one such site, the former DIY store in Nightingale Road, will probably make a substantial contribution towards the number of new dwellings foreseen for the proposed greenbelt extension of Hitchin. This emphasises that a highly damaging, greenbelt development beyond the boundaries of Hitchin is not required to meet housing targets.

Overall

The disproportionate damage that would be caused by the relatively small edge-of-town housing development, coupled with the already exceptionally high contribution being made by Hitchin towards meeting the District’s housing targets, shows that the proposed development is both inappropriate and unnecessary. The extensions proposed for other towns in North Hertfordshire are not relevant to this scheme, and should not be used to justify this development on the basis of equality of treatment between the four towns.