

## **SAFEGUARDING THE GREEN BELT FROM RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT**

### **1 Background and purpose**

- 1.1 Enfield's population has grown rapidly in the past decade and presently stands at 324,000 comprising 129,000 households making it the fourth largest borough in London. Projections indicate that by 2032 the population will have risen to over 358,000. Reflecting this, the GLA's London Plan (March 2015) increases Enfield's target from a minimum of 560 new homes per annum to a minimum of 798 homes per annum.
- 1.2 The scale of this challenge means that a range of sources of supply of suitable land will be needed. The simplest and cheapest available land to develop from the Council's and residential developers' perspective is to be found in the Green Belt in the northern part of the Borough. **The Conservative Opposition has noted increased interest in developing sites in the Green Belt for residential development in recent months and seeks through this OPB to highlight the issues raised and to make a reasoned case for maintaining the current safeguards preventing such development.**

### **2. The proposed Enfield Road residential development**

- 2.1 The petition submitted by the Enfield Road Watch and heard by the Council prior to this OPB seeks to oppose the possible redevelopment by Fairview New Homes of a substantial site in the Green Belt south of Enfield Road for 300 plus new homes and an 8 – form of entry secondary school linked to the Wren Academy in Finchley. We understand the Council's Planning Department is consulting the GLA but the formal application process has not yet been initiated.
- 2.2 This is potentially one of the most significant attacks on the Green Belt we have seen in recent years. It is understood that the Administration is minded to look favourably on this development and it therefore requires scrutiny by the whole Council as well as through the planning process. As part of OPB we would therefore ask the Administration to:
  - 2.2.1 Confirm the proposed process under which the planning application in relation to this site will be assessed, given that the review of the Local Plan has not yet started
  - 2.2.2 Confirm whether, given that the report on school places to the Cabinet on 21<sup>st</sup> October said that additional demand for secondary school places in the west of the Borough was not likely to occur for another 5 years and the highest immediate demand is likely to be in the central Enfield area, ~~has~~ the Council has considered the likely financial impact on Southgate and Highlands schools

once the new school is complete.

- 2.2.3 Provide a list of all the potential academy/free school providers contacted in relation to this site as required under section 6A of the Education and Inspections Act 2006?
- 2.2.4 Confirm what net increase in secondary school places is estimated to be provided by the proposed new school if 300 new homes are developed on the adjacent site, many of which will be occupied by families.
- 2.2.5 Confirm, with Enfield Road a major gateway between Enfield and Southgate and an escape route from the M25, what traffic assessments have been undertaken to ensure that this route remains uncongested and the other roads linked to it.

### **3. Other impacts on the Green Belt**

- 3.1 Another worrying example is the purchase by the Council earlier this year of Sloeman's Farm in the Green Belt, a 47 hectare site, just north of Whitewebbs' public Golf Course for several million pounds whilst the Council claims consistently that it has no money. There have been persistent rumours that the Golf Course is struggling financially and we are therefore concerned for its future. When the Sloeman's Farm decision was called in by the Opposition on financial grounds earlier this year, the Leader of the Council was unable or unwilling to explain what the ultimate purpose of this acquisition was which was alarming given that the Council had previously been selling off freeholds in the Green Belt to raise money.
- 3.2 We recently heard that Berkeley Homes have purchased the former Middlesex University site in the heart of Trent Park following the demise of the former owners, the Malaysian Alliances University of Medical Science. This raises different, although important, issues regarding the conservation of the Green belt because the historic house is listed but surrounded by poor quality student housing constructed in the 1960s

### **4 The Green Belt and why it is Government policy to protect it**

- 4.1 The Government attaches great importance to the Green Belt. As Section 9 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) introduced in March 2012 makes clear the fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open; the essential characteristics of Green Belts are their openness and their permanence.
- 4.2 The Green Belt serves five purposes:
  - To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built up areas;
  - To prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another;

- To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;
- To preserve the setting and special character of historic towns;
- To assist in urban regeneration by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.

#### 4.3 The NPPF makes some other important points:

- Once established, the Green Belt boundaries in any given area should only be altered in exceptional circumstances, through the preparation or review of the Local Plan;
- The local authority should regard the construction of new buildings as inappropriate in the Green Belt except in the case of:
  - Buildings for agriculture and forestry
  - Provision of appropriate facilities for outdoor sport, recreation and for cemeteries
  - The extension or alteration of a building providing the new building is the same use and not materially larger than the one it replaces;
  - Limited infilling in villages and limited affordable housing if set out in the Local Plan
  - Limited infilling or partial or complete redevelopment of brown field sites within the Green Belt which would not have a greater impact than the existing development.

4.4 The London Plan issued in March 2015 is equally clear. The Mayor strongly supports the current extent of London's Green Belt, its extension in appropriate circumstances and its protection from inappropriate development. It goes on to say that paragraphs 79-92 of the NPPF (summarised above) gives clear guidance on the functions the Green Belt performs, its key characteristics, acceptable uses and how its boundaries should be altered, if necessary. The Green Belt has an important role to play as part of London's multifunctional green infrastructure and the Mayor is keen to see improvements in its overall quality and accessibility. Green Belts are likely to help human health by combating pollution in built up areas; maintain biodiversity; and improve the quality of life through healthier lifestyles and air quality.

4.5 Although planning guidance has not changed significantly, the Green Belt is coming under increasing threat from residential development. In 2009/10 only 2,259 new homes were developed across the Green Belt. In 2014/15, this figure had grown to 11,977.

4.6 The former Local Government Secretary, Eric Pickles, issued new guidance earlier this year after becoming concerned that Councils were sacrificing Green Belt to meet new housing targets. The NPPF includes protections for the Green Belt, but he was

concerned that councils were ignoring them. Specifically the new guidance makes clear that councils do not have to build on the Green Belt to meet 5 year housing targets. A Government source was quoted as saying “Many planning officers are telling their councillors that they have to remove Green Belt protection when drawing up local plans in order to meet housing demand. The Government is making it clear that this isn’t the case.”

- 4.7 We understand that the Council’s review of its Core Strategy (Local Plan) is imminent. Enfield’s Local Plan is the key to shaping the future of the Borough and ensuring the right amount of development is built in the right place at the right time. Public consultation will outline the challenges faced by Enfield and seek views from the local residents, businesses and other stakeholders on how growth will be accommodated. We hope, however, that the Administration will not hide behind the fact that a review is due to start and refuse to debate Green Belt issues which are of significant public interest.

## **8 Conclusions**

- 8.1 The purpose of this OPB is to set out the planning position regarding the protection of the Green Belt and clarify any misconceptions as to what constitutes exceptional circumstances for allowing development. It seems clear, notwithstanding the demand for new housing in the borough and for schools and other infrastructure to support it, that permitting new large scale residential development in the Green Belt is not permissible.

## **9 Recommendations to Council**

That the Administration:

- 9.1 Agrees to respond to the issues highlighted in section 4 of the OPB paper relating to Enfield Road.
- 9.2 Agrees to comply with the criteria laid down by Government and the Mayor to protect the rural character of the Green Belt and not allow residential or other inappropriate development on it.
- 9.3 Confirms the start and proposed completion dates of the Local Plan review in particular when public consultation will be undertaken **and**, furthermore, agrees to publish the terms and scope of the review as soon as possible.
- 9.4 Agrees to publish the list of significant brown field sites within the Borough that are available for residential development as has been asked for by the Opposition on a

number of occasions.

- 9.5 Agrees, given that a Labour Government under Ed Milliband was not elected and that the green belt remains safe under a Conservative Government, to provide a timetable for the disposal of Sloeman's farm to the private sector.
- 9.6 Agrees, in order to reassure local residents and protect the environmental and civic amenity of Trent Park, to provide a development plan for the campus site setting out the Council's requirements in terms of public access to the listed House and grounds; whether the educational use of the House will be preserved; the heights and density of the residential development and the design standards that will apply.
- 9.7. Agrees to support a call to the next Mayor of London to tighten further the provisions relating to the metropolitan Green Belt so that it becomes impossible for development to take place in the Green Belt for other than specified exceptions.