

## **Response to the Green Belt Review commissioned by Welwyn Hatfield Council mainly as it relates to Woolmer Green**

I considered this document an excellent review of the Metropolitan Green Belt in the Borough of Welwyn Hatfield and would like to make the following comments regarding the inset village of Woolmer Green, the most northerly settlement in the Borough.

However, I am saddened by the Minutes of the Planning and Parking Panel's discussion on the Green Belt Review not being available on-line in time for me to view prior to my submitting this paper. I am thus unable to comment on whether the Panel has adopted Scenario One or Scenario Two set out in Para 4.28 and this is vital to the future of Woolmer Green.

I will be discussing the designated parcel P3 in the review which has been split into separate portions according to the proposal by Welwyn Hatfield to release some of this land for housing which must be balanced against the harm done to the Green Belt and am pleased to see that the Review considers the undeveloped gap between Woolmer Green and Knebworth very important in Green Belt terms.

I note that, in the review on specific sites it states on p12 that "*The north-eastern boundary of the parcel is also the Borough boundary which crosses unmarked through a large arable field, so the integrity of Green Belt beyond would be weakened by the parcel's release.*" Although the proposed boundary for the WGr1 development does not follow the borough boundary in its entirety it does not meet the criteria for defining a permanent defensible boundary even with some sort of boundary planting. To further exacerbate this, the rest of this field, besides being in North Herts, also belongs to the owners of Swangleys Farm who have put in an application to North Herts to release some of this Green Belt land for housing. This examination is still in process but, should North Herts agree to the release of this portion of land, again with an ill-defined southern boundary, it would leave this whole section of green belt land extremely vulnerable and contribute excessively to the coalescence of Woolmer Green and Knebworth and thus to the removal of the Green Belt dividing Welwyn Garden City from Stevenage. The soundness of the Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan is definitely not evident.

Previous Green Belt reviews have commented on the presence of water but not this one. It is, however, very important in the context of Woolmer Green. Considering surface water, I can find no reference to the fact that all rainfall in the village is dispersed by means of soakaways. This is to be commended in that the supply of clean water is ensured but only so if the soakaways are efficient enough for the task in hand and with the increased incidence of extreme events this is unlikely to be the case. The previous greenbelt review spoke of 'puddling' on the various sites but, with Woolmer Green sitting in the middle of a double saddle, this is not the case. This picture from four years ago is a good illustration of what happens in New Road on a regular basis, adjacent,



incidentally, to the proposed site for 150 houses. This lack of knowledge is another reason to assess the Local Plan as unsound.

In view of the fact that Woolmer Green is the smallest settlement to be excluded from the Green Belt and also that, in the Council's Emerging Core Strategy it states that "Woolmer Green has had more than its fair share of housing in recent years", I am pleased to see the recommendation in the Green Belt review that some of the washed over settlements should now be excluded from the Green Belt.

One final point which probably does not stem from the Green Belt review but which is nevertheless important: The public inquiry into the draft East of England Plan which took place some ten years ago and at which I represented the town and parish councils of Hertfordshire concluded that 5,800 houses could be built in the Borough up until 2031 subject to certain caveats one of which was that 'water supply and quality must be assured by long term investments in water infrastructure and efficiency measures, informed by a properly resourced programme of detailed water cycle studies that look beyond 2031' (*report by Jon Tiley to HCC Environment and Planning Cabinet Panel, April 2010*). We are now, 10 years later and 10 years closer to 2031, being asked to consider three times as many houses in Welwyn Hatfield. I note that this problem has already been raised by Dean McBride (EX75A) to this examination, specifically identifying the proposals for Woolmer Green and also the vague response from WHBC Planning. My conclusion would be: no upgrade to Ryemeads – no more housing in Woolmer Green. Indeed, just prior to the RSS proposals a patch had to be put on the sewage outfall here due to its backing up into people's gardens.

You will not be surprised that I find the Local Plan in its relation to Woolmer Green not to be sound. I do ask myself if my Local Council is indeed looking to the future. In both Welwyn Garden City and in Hatfield and, to an even greater extent in Stevenage New Town, shops and offices are being converted into living accommodation and we are in a tipping point for retail at the moment. I am pleased to see that money has been given for greater cooperation between Welwyn Hatfield, East Herts, North Herts and Stevenage. My vision of the future is that we should be taking inspiration from the continental scheme of things with a denser occupation of the towns and minimal intrusion into the Green Belt.

**Judith Watson**