

Bim Afolami MP

Response to Local Plan

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak today about the North Herts District Council Proposed Submission for the Local Plan (2011-2031).

As MP for Hitchin and Harpenden, I represent nine of the twenty-four wards in North Herts.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak, despite not making representations in the earlier consultation (which was before my election in June), as many of my constituents are hugely concerned about this Plan. I have received many letters, emails and visits to surgeries on this subject, and I feel that I must represent the views of my constituents on this Local Plan.

This area of the country is known for its beauty. This beautiful stretch of countryside alongside and encompassing the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty is part of the reason many of us choose to live here.

This Plan will guide development in North Hertfordshire for many years, and so it's extremely important that we get it right. And it is vital that we get a Local Plan in place, otherwise we leave ourselves vulnerable to unplanned development.

I am extremely aware of the acute need for more housing in North Herts. Since 2008, only 330 homes per year have been built in the district. But we need to find a way to balance that with the need to preserve the countryside and the character and heritage of this area, of which we are all so proud.

After reading many dozens of submissions from my constituents, I have identified three main themes that I wish to point out to the Planning Inspector – protecting the Green Belt, coalescence, and lack of appropriate infrastructure spending.

Public consultation

Many of my constituents are grateful for the period of consultation and the chance they have been given to make their views known to planning inspectors.

Green space

North Hertfordshire is a very rural part of the country, and it was beautiful countryside that brought many of my constituents here. For example, the view from the Green Man in Offley across to the north east is simply wonderful, and I have enjoyed hugely going on walks and bike rides with my little boys in the countryside around both Hitchin and Harpenden.

We are lucky to live here, and must respect this piece of countryside as one of the most beautiful places in England.

I and many of my constituents are deeply concerned about protecting the Green Belt. It is one of the reasons why North Herts is such a wonderful place to live. The Green Belt was originally designed to prevent coalescence of settlements, and my constituents feel strongly that this should be kept in place to prevent a loss of individual character from our towns and villages, as well as to protect the countryside we all enjoy. From a more recent perspective, the Green Belt is a key part of the National Policy Planning Framework (NPPF), and even in the Government's Budget statement of last week the Chancellor said that the Government firmly believed in "continuing the strong protection of our Green Belt". The Green Belt is central to our planning framework in this country, and this is critical.

What does coalescence mean? The Planning Portal glossary describes coalescence as “the merging or coming together of separate towns or villages to form a single entity”.¹ One of the purposes of the Green Belt (in very broad terms) is to prevent or limit coalescence and some local planning authorities (LPAs) aim to preserve a “green gap” or “local gap”, to prevent coalescence. I urge the Planning Inspector to look closely at developments that seem to bring villages and towns extremely close together, as this does not appear to be in the letter and spirit of this very important planning principle. We need to have assurances that developers will not be able to turn North Herts into a conurbation running from Luton all the way to Baldock – please could the Planning Inspector be mindful of that potential under the current plans?

The National Planning Policy Framework states that Local Plans should meet objectively assessed needs, with sufficient flexibility to adapt to rapid change, unless any adverse impacts of doing so would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits. I gather that the Planning Inspector will be able to show his workings on each of the Green Belt sites that form part of the Local Plan early next year – I welcome that. As I mentioned earlier, however, it is vital that we sort all this in the Local Plan, so that we are not prone to speculative Green Belt planning applications from developers, which then must be considered in full in accordance with the aforementioned criteria.

Overall Housing Target Number and Infrastructure

Various community groups in my constituency have done a lot of research into the overall housing target number and have published and submitted their findings to this inquiry. I urge the Planning Inspectors to look at their findings in detail and to consider them fully. In general terms, there is a lot of concern from local residents that the overall housing target number for North Hertfordshire is excessive and will be extremely difficult to meet.

I understand the need for cooperation under the Duty to Cooperate, but many homes we will need to build are to meet Luton Borough Council’s excess housing need, and it would be good to have reassurance from the Planning Inspector on that point. In particular, the expected future expansion of Luton Airport and the commercial development at Century Park is likely to have significant impacts on road infrastructure and traffic, and this needs to be taken into consideration.

Similarly, the impact of Central Bedfordshire Council Local Plan developments in the settlements near to Ickleford could be profound in terms of traffic flow. I would welcome reassurance from the Planning Inspector that the neighbouring Councils will work in tandem on settlements near district boundaries to ensure that new development in Bedfordshire works for the residents of North Hertfordshire as well.

Infrastructure

The National Planning Policy Framework states, as one of its 12 core principles, that planning should proactively drive and support sustainable economic development to deliver the homes, business and industrial units, **infrastructure** and thriving local places that the country needs.

North Hertfordshire is a very rural area with small lanes and limited public transport, with many Areas ONB. The increase in housing, proposed in this Local Plan, will overwhelm the current road infrastructure, not to mention GPs, schools and other local services. I strongly urge the Planning Inspector to bear the rural nature of North Hertfordshire in mind when analysing the infrastructure proposals contained within the local plan and any recommendations he wishes to make.

¹ Planning Portal, [Glossary: Coalescence](#)

I hope that local groups are consulted as to how funds raised through the CIL and Section 106 could be used to best serve the community.

The Local Plan states that “For major developments, applicants [should] demonstrate (as far as is practicable) how: i.) the proposed scheme would be served by public transport; and ii) safe, direct and convenient routes for pedestrians and cyclists will be provided.”

My constituents are concerned that attention is paid to ‘green’ modes of transport as well as just roads. They would welcome projects such as designated cycle paths. I would urge North Herts Council to ensure that developers take their responsibility in this regard seriously, rather than just paying lip service to this requirement before the development starts, and ignoring it afterwards.