

Representation to Planning Inspector

The railway line forms a very significant barrier across the north of Baldock. HCC's Transport Assessment describes the railway as a "severance" between Baldock North and the station. It is the implications of this severance on one of the key strategic sites in the Local Plan that I wish to discuss.

The main route into the town centre from Baldock North has to pass under a narrow railway bridge and then cross a highly-congested road junction at the point where Station Road meets Royston Road, Whitehorse Street and Clothall Road. The combination of the railway line and the congested road junction forms a constriction that already generates long queues of traffic. I call it the Baldock bottleneck. It's a major problem that the council have so far failed to solve.

The Baldock North development is being proposed as an expansion of the existing town, so people living on the new development will be expected to make use of town-centre facilities. However, the Baldock bottleneck will make it very difficult for Baldock North residents to gain access to the town centre, because it is already seriously congested and a development of 2,800 homes will put an additional 3,500¹ cars on the road. This will simply lead to gridlock and will further exacerbate existing air pollution problems.

The Baldock North planning application assumes a new link road connecting the A507 north of Baldock to the A505 east of Baldock. However, it is not explained how this link road will address the needs of Baldock North residents who need to go to parts of the town centre that are just on the other side of the railway line.

The standard answer is that they will be encouraged to walk or cycle rather than use their cars, and the development assumes two new footbridges across the railway line. However, these options are not so viable from the eastern end of the development - particularly when it is raining - and they are even less viable for people with small children or certain types of disability. Even able-bodied people are very unlikely to walk or cycle to Sainsburys to do their weekly shopping. Whether the planners like it or not, these people are going to use their cars. Some will add to the existing congestion on Station Road, while others will turn east onto the link road and then enter the same congested junction from the east. The planners already describe this junction as "problematic" (I think most residents would use much stronger language) but it is going to become much, much worse.

There are listed buildings on either side of the junction so there are no simple solutions to this problem - which is why nothing has been done about it. If the Baldock North development is to be viable, then the problem has to be solved. It is therefore very surprising (and disappointing) that the Local Plan Transport Technical Review identifies the problem junction but offers no solutions, while the

¹ Based on 2,800 new homes in Baldock North development, and an estimate of 1.27 cars / home (31.7m cars / 25m homes for the UK as a whole). This ignores the additional cars generated by other developments in Baldock.

mitigations proposed in the Transport Assessment occupy little more than one page.

Paragraph 6.4.11 of the Transport Assessment suggests modifications to the traffic lights to reduce the amount of time allocated to pedestrians². To the residents of Baldock who have endured massive traffic jams at this junction for many years, the suggestion that the problem can be solved by a few simple changes to the traffic lights is hard to swallow. If it is really that simple, why was it not done years ago? Furthermore, if it is really that simple, why do we need to plan on the basis of simulations when we could try it right now and see if it actually works?

The credibility of the Transport Assessment is further undermined by Paragraph 6.4.15 which states that “an alternative approach has been considered to replace the existing signals with a double mini roundabout”. Given the problems that even quite small lorries encounter at the existing junction, it is hard to imagine how any vehicle larger than a car would be able to weave their way around two mini roundabouts in such a constricted space.

Although the link road will not help the residents of Baldock North, it could be a major benefit to traffic flowing between places such as Ampthill in the east and Royston in the west. Both of these roads are dual carriageway as they approach Baldock, so the link road can be expected to be equally busy. The link road will become a major road running through the development because it is roughly half the distance of the alternative route via the A1 and the Baldock bypass. Unless some way can be found to prevent this from happening, it will become a classic “rat run” that will attract traffic away from the A1 and the Baldock bypass. Building new roads that migrate heavy traffic off the trunk network into residential areas is exactly the WRONG thing to be doing.

So far, no solution has been found. Indeed, the Transport Assessment makes it clear that the planners actually need to divert some of this traffic through the development to relieve the pressure on the problem junction in the town centre³. The Noise Assessment for Baldock North⁴ has assessed the link road and concluded that “the recommended WHO/BS 8233 internal noise levels are generally exceeded across the site during the daytime and night-time, assuming a windows-closed scenario”. The document also says that most of the properties within the site boundary will need noise-reducing ventilation systems, and should face away from

² Paragraph 6.4.11: “The existing signals use far-side pedestrian signals. The pedestrian signals could be replaced with near-side Puffin displays with pedestrian kerbside and on-crossing detection. This will reduce the duration of the green man, eliminate unnecessary calls for the pedestrian stage and allow early curtailment of pedestrian-to-traffic intergreens. These measures combined will reduce lost time and improve junction performance.”

³ Transport Assessment, p6, states that “the proposed North Link Road through the site provides wider benefits for the town by facilitating redistribution of existing traffic away from sensitive links and junctions within the town centre”.

⁴ Document 01466848, Page 29.

the road⁵. The HCC public presentations at the Baldock Community Centre focussed on a cycle-friendly “greenway” that meanders through the development, but the reality for most residents will be a major road thundering past their house.

Another problem with the link road is that it effectively accepts that the Baldock North development can never become an integral part of Baldock. The road does nothing to help the residents of Baldock North gain access to town centre facilities that are physically very close to them unless they take a long detour. As a result, Baldock will develop like an hourglass with two physically-close but largely separate town centres linked by a narrow constriction. There is a real risk that the new link road will mean that the Baldock North development will develop a closer affinity with towns such as Stotfold - which would only be about 2 miles away and linked by a fast road. Although the development would lie within the boundary of Baldock, it would be a ghetto having little involvement with the life of the town.

This flies in the face of Section 2 of the National Planning Policy Framework which requires new developments to promote the vitality of associated town centres, and talks about developing on “accessible sites that are well connected to the town centre”. Consequently, the Baldock North development is not consistent with national policy, which requires “sustainable development in accordance with the policies in the NPPF”.

However, the residents of Baldock and the surrounding villages have not been given any opportunity to comment on the soundness of the transport-related aspects of the Local Plan for Baldock North because the relevant information was only published on 19th January (ie 2.5 weeks ago) which is long after all the closing dates for written submissions. Furthermore, I suspect that most residents are not yet aware that this information has been published. It is very surprising to me that the NHDC Local Plan has been allowed to go through most of its approval stages without the transport information that could determine whether one of its largest strategic developments is actually deliverable. I would respectfully request that the public should be given an opportunity to submit written comments on this critical issue prior to any final decision on the Local Plan.

Dr Andrew Wheen
25 Wedon Way, Bygrave, Baldock, Herts, SG7 5DX
andrew.wheen@gmail.com
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⁵ Document 01466848, Page 36.