

THE LETCHWORTH GARDEN CITY SOCIETY



BRIEFING

PROPOSALS TO BUILD 1000 HOUSES ON THE GREEN BELT TO THE NORTH OF THE GRANGE
NOVEMBER 2014

INTRODUCTION

The Garden City and the Green Belt

Ebenezer Howard's concept for the development of Letchworth Garden City was a town of 32,000 where industry would flourish with housing for workers which provided for a healthy life with gardens, and a green/agricultural belt to allow easy access to the countryside. Howard was adamant that the green belt should not be built on,

Shall it build on the zone of agricultural land which is around it, and thus forever destroy its right to be called a "Garden City"? Surely not. This disastrous result would indeed take place if the land around the town were, as is the land around our present cities, owned by private individuals anxious to make a profit out of it. For then as the town filled up, the agricultural land would become "ripe" for building purposes and the beauty and healthfulness of the town would be quickly destroyed. But the land around the Garden City is, fortunately, not in the hands of private individuals: it is in the hands of the people: and is to be administered, not in the supposed interests of the few, but in the real interests of the whole community.

Ebenezer Howard, 'Garden Cities of Tomorrow' (1902)

Why do we love our Garden City?

We feel lucky to live in Letchworth Garden City and appreciate its architecture, urban planning, gardens, green spaces and green belt.

We recognise there are challenges to be faced in both addressing local housing need and protecting the world's first garden city, but we do not see these as mutually exclusive. We believe that there is common ground in the town in a desire to address both these challenges and to do the best for the people of Letchworth and the wider local community.

We think that building on Letchworth's green belt is wrong in principle, will not meaningfully address local housing need, and will cause increased traffic congestion and parking problems. This briefing note sets out our concerns. If you agree, we ask you to contact your MP and local councillors to let them know your views before it is too late.

THE SOCIETY'S CONCERNS

What are our concerns?

Letchworth, the world's first garden city was designed with a green/agricultural belt, to allow residents easy access to the countryside and keep Letchworth separate from surrounding towns and villages. The proposal, put forward by the Heritage Foundation and shortly to be debated by NHDC, to build 1,000 new homes on the green belt north of the Grange, will leave just one field between the new development and Stotfold.

Only a small fraction of the housing will be “affordable” housing for rent and there is no guarantee that “affordable” housing for sale would be provided for local people. Current precedent indicates that two-thirds of the proposed houses for sale will be bought by buy-to-let property investors and speculators.

1,000 new houses will mean significant additional traffic driving through the town, with increased congestion and pressure on already limited parking for commuters, residents, and wider users of the town centre alike.

Not only does it risk being a distraction from meaningfully and sustainably addressing local housing needs, but it also risks undermining and permanently damaging a fundamental aspect of the garden city concept.

What is the value of the original plan?

As the world's first garden city it is important that Letchworth retains the key features which characterise Ebenezer Howard's vision and form such an important part of its significance today. These are not simply academic or aesthetic niceties - not only do they give clarity and meaning to the garden city as a sustainable, living, working settlement, but they add value in a very direct way to all our daily lives.

In 1931 in *Letchworth. A Town in the Country* produced by the First Garden City Ltd (a predecessor body of today's Heritage Foundation formed to develop the garden city) it said,

Surrounding the whole town is a belt of open land, which has been reserved for all time for its present use. This acts as protection against overgrowth from without or within, and ensures that the countryside shall always be within walking distance of the town centre.

First Garden City Ltd, 'Letchworth. A Town in the Country' (1931)

QUESTIONS ASKED

But don't we need to address the housing crisis?

Yes, but the proposed development on the green belt appears to focus more on treating the symptoms of a voracious demand for housing, fuelled by property investors and speculators and those fleeing from even more overheated housing markets in places such as London and Cambridge, than on addressing the cause. The national housing crisis is a complex problem and impacts on local areas in different ways – addressing the situation requires something more considered and more sustainable.

Everyone's got to do their bit, haven't they? Why are we different?

In the 100 years since its founding, the Garden City has already provided homes for over 32,000 inhabitants, and has done so with great style and vivacity. Building 1,000 new houses in arguably the most significant green belt in the country fundamentally attacks what Letchworth stands for, and for little long-term gain. If we still believe in the garden city, shouldn't we be seeking to promote another one instead?

Hasn't the green belt already served its purpose?

The green belt's prime role was always to prevent the garden city being over-extended and over-developed. It came into its own when the planned limit was reached. The green belt is not simply a land bank to be dipped into whenever there is a demand for more house building.

Shouldn't we let others enjoy the same benefits we enjoy?

Yes, of course we should. However, we would not give others those benefits by diluting and permanently damaging the great achievement that is the world's first garden city. Far better we promote a new generation of garden cities, and try to address our own local needs more sustainably.

QUESTIONS WE NEED TO ASK

Will the proposals really address local housing need?

Will the proposals really address the housing need that exists in Letchworth and the wider local community?

- precedent indicates that two-thirds of new housing will be bought by property investors and speculators
- will the remaining fraction of housing for sale even be affordable by local people?

- how many properties will stand empty as so many do in London as investors wait for prices to rise?

When the green belt land is lost and the housing built, will the local people really have felt a positive impact?

Will the housing be affordable (and affordable to whom)?

Will local people be able to afford the properties for sale when competing with others from London, etc?

Will local people be able to afford the rents of privately let housing?

Will any housing sold as 'affordable' remain affordable by local people once sold on the open market?

Are the proposals sustainable?

Letchworth reached its planned size of 32,000 a long time ago – to be sustainable, don't we need to meet our housing needs within that planned size? If our existing housing is not affordable, if we cannot meet our current and future housing needs as things stand, we need to examine, understand, and address the issues arising in a considered and sustainable way.

How will the new development affect us?

A fundamental aspect of the garden city concept (and the design of Letchworth) will be undermined.

Local housing need will be left unresolved.

Increased traffic congestion and parking problems will arise, creating a more urban character to many roads and public spaces.

FINAL THOUGHTS

What are our concerns?

We share the desire to try to help tackle what is a national housing crisis, and to do our bit. Our concern is that the current proposals will not meaningfully meet our own local housing needs, will lead to increased traffic and parking problems, and are fundamentally against the concept of the garden city itself. The proposals represent something that the garden city was set up to avoid - haphazard and piecemeal extension and over-development of the existing town.

The sheer scale of the development suggests to most people that it will have a dramatic and far reaching impact on local housing needs. There will no doubt be limited 'affordable' housing for rent, but the majority of the rest is likely to be bought not by local people for their own use, but as investments by property investors and speculators. If local housing needs will not have been meaningfully met or addressed, one has to ask what will it all be for?

The national housing crisis is a complex problem and the garden city offers us a unique model for addressing it in a planned, sustainable way. Building 1,000 homes on the green belt of the world's first garden city undermines the principle upon which it was founded and damages the great achievement which we all benefit from today.

What can we do?

If like us, you agree that building on Letchworth's green belt is wrong, and that there are other, more sustainable ways of addressing housing need, such as a new garden city, we ask you to contact your MP and the local council to let them know your views before it is too late. For contact details, see overleaf.

PEOPLE TO CONTACT

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THE LETCHWORTH GARDEN CITY SOCIETY

How the Society Began

The Letchworth Garden City Society was formed in 1978, “*to promote the study, conservation and development of the aims and ideals of the founders*”. It was born after a series of lectures given by Dr. Mervyn Miller on the Garden City Movement. A meeting was held on 22nd February 1978 at Hugh Bidwell's house to explore how the essential character of Letchworth Garden City could be preserved. It was attended by about 24 people, including some guests from Hampstead Garden Suburb, and the formation of a Society along the lines of the one in Hampstead was mooted. The first public meeting was held on Wednesday 28th June 1978 in the Public Library, and the Society was formed with a starting membership of 175. Hugh Bidwell became the first chairman, Horace Plinston the vice-chairman, and Tom Downing the secretary.

The Growth of the Society

The Society immediately set about recruiting new members. It produced a newsletter, typed by the secretary's wife, Rita. Tom Downing delivered it personally due to lack of funds. The Society continued to flourish and later that year took part in the Trade Fair held by Letchworth Garden City Corporation to mark its 75th anniversary. The Society's stand, designed and organised by Tom Downing, attracted much interest and more members were recruited, bringing the membership to over 300. The membership fee at that time was just £1 per year. In 1979, the Society organised and funded a summer festival, Letchworth's first ever One Day Fun Day. It continued to run the One Day Fun Day for several years, but had to rely on the Letchworth Garden City Corporation for financial support due to the difficulty in finding entertainers as well as rising costs (including policing the event). The Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation took control of the event a number of years ago.

The Society Now

The Society holds regular meetings at the Settlement and attracts a good audience of people interested in the garden city both past and present. There is always a wide range of speakers on various topics relating to the first garden city, and those people and ideas who have influenced it. Visits to places of interest to the Society have been organised. The Society is also a campaigning organisation and this briefing document forms a part of its work. The newsletter has been replaced by a quarterly journal and the annual subscription is still only £5.

How to Find Out More About the Society

If you would like to find out more about the Society, we would like to hear from you – please contact us.

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