

Save the Brockhill Green Belt Petition (October 2011) Complaint to the Scrutiny and Overview Committee

The Complaint

There are two areas of concern we have in respect of the petition

- **The way the petition was dealt with on the evening**
- **The allocation of the petition solely to RBC Planning**

We were led to believe that if there were over 400 signatories on a petition then this could trigger a presentation being made by the Petition Team in front of a full Council, where it could be openly discussed.

When we arrived at the Town Hall we were approached and presented, by RBC Legal, the following

- **You can't discuss the Brockhill ADR because of the development application for 171 houses submitted by Persimmon and being heard on the following Wednesday**
- **The Councillors cannot discuss the petition in case it is construed by Persimmon as detrimental to this pending application**
- **The outcome is that the petition will be passed directly to RBC Planning because it is Policy based**

We discussed that the petition is only about Brockhill Green Belt and actually criticises RBC Planning but were told in no uncertain terms the above would happen.

In answer to the above points

- **The petition is clearly about Brockhill Green Belt and Brockhill Green Belt only**
- **The representation submitted as a part of the official petition pack made it clear that the petition was not about Brockhill ADR. However as Brockhill East Green Belt has been included into Brockhill East Policy 29 in the CS then there may have been some mention to Brockhill ADR. However there would have been no direct reference to the pending application for 171 houses**
- **There is mention in the petition representation submitted, referring to the CS and Planning Policies, however there is a lot of criticism aimed directly at RBC Planning. Not just concerning policy but the processes by which they arrived at the requirement and inclusion of Green Belt for immediate development**

We believe because we are being critical of RBC Planning, the petition should never have been passed to them solely. They have an input, yes: the same as we do, but we believe that passing it solely to them is too self-regulatory and that is one of the reasons why we are here tonight to make our complaint and ask you to assist us in changing the outcome. There is little that can be done in respect of the presentation, but we feel we should have been given the option to reschedule the presentation to a time when an open discussion could have been held.

Below you will find an explanation of the situation and some of the criticisms as we see them and you will find our conclusions at the end of the report.

Background

Redditch Borough has been set a target of 7,000 dwellings by the West Midlands Regional Spatial Strategy (WMRSS) for the period 2006 to 2026. It was agreed that 4,000 were to be sited within the boundary and the remaining 3,000 cross boundary. The Core Strategy (CS) refers to this target and maintains that it remains in force until its official replacement by the Localism Bill.

Issues

Redditch Borough has a very limited reserve of non Green Belt land on which to develop and after this plan, will be close to land availability bankruptcy. The Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) last revisited in April 2010 highlights sites available and deliverable for the plan period within the Redditch boundary. They show a figure insufficient

to meet the WMRSS target and more than likely insufficient to address the new target that Redditch Planning are currently investigating and evaluating. Two of the sites included in the CS, Brockhill East And Brockhill West are exiting Greenbelt and the petition was clearly in respect of these sites and these sites only. It has never been or will be, anything to do with the Brockhill ADR.

Sustainability Development is mentioned a number of times in the CS and the official definition is **“Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”**. We believe that building on Green Belt in such a manner as the CS proposes is totally in breach of this definition and therefore development on these two Green Belt sites can not be called ‘sustainable development’.

PPG2 (Planning Policy Guidance 2: Green Belts)

There are 5 purposes of including land in Green Belt and not for development, 2 of which are highlighted here

- To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built up areas
- To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment

The PPG2 deems all building to be inappropriate on Green Belt unless very exceptional circumstances exist. The protection is also to encourage recycling of derelict and other urban land. Therefore, there is a requirement to investigate further all land availability in Redditch, for example the NHS Smallwood Hospital site and the land east of the railway at Brockhill East, where the owners have recently held a public consultation exercise showing how they would like to build 212 new dwellings. These sites are not Green Belt so must be considered before any Green Belt is developed.

Section 3.4 details 5 reasons that indicate why building on Green Belt would not be inappropriate. None of these reasons are applicable to the Brockhill Green Belts.

To develop on Green Belt there must be very clear exceptional circumstances. RBC Planners are using an argument ‘Due to the high level of housing needs and limited locations for development, exceptional circumstances exist to remove land from the Green Belt to form part of the strategic sites for development’. We believe this argument is void when considering the CS is only a partial CS, with questionable and possibly changing targets and without a full clear strategic approach showing how they will deliver Redditch’s full requirements for the period 2006 to 2026 and beyond. We also believe that this statement together with the Sustainable Development definition show that if Green Belt is included in this way, no development can be classed as **‘sustainable’**

Paragraph 2.12 states that ‘any proposals affecting Green Belts should be related to a time-scale which is longer than that normally adopted for other aspects of the plan. The CS Policy 7 states ‘All Strategic Sites for development can come forward immediately in accordance with the policies in the Development Plan’. Brockhill East and West Green Belts are Strategic Sites and are Green Belt. These two statements seem to be in direct conflict.

The Core Strategy

Redditch cannot build its total requirement as identified in the CS. When challenged about its completeness, Redditch Planning have acknowledged and identified that it is only a partial CS. It requires further, possibly long and intricate discussions between themselves and Bromsgrove DC in respect of possible expansion. The Planning Department are reviewing the requirements using more accurate statistics from WCC and with the forthcoming Localism Bill about to be introduced, may present new targets and further associated development sites. Until this is complete, Green Belt should not be considered as a strategic site for development.

Complaint – In respect of RBC Planning

The existing partial CS has identified two areas of Green Belt as strategic sites Policy 29 Brockhill East and Policy 30 Brockhill West.

Policy 29 Brockhill East

The Green Belt we are petitioning for is a part of this policy. Together with Brockhill ADR it has been titled Brockhill East. We would like to make it clear that this petition is concerning Brockhill Green Belt only and does not include Brockhill ADR.

Policy 30 Brockhill West

Brockhill West was known and identified as late as April 2010 in the SHLAA as Foxlydiat Green Belt. Its name changed when it was included in the CS as a strategic site for development. There is no reference made at all to it being Green Belt either in the title or in the whole of Policy 30, in its principals or justification. For a public consultation document this is unacceptable, unprofessional and misleading. People were asked to comment on the CS without being supplied with a full and clear description of the site identified. To most locals this is the only document they ever get to read in respect of planning and care should be taken to ensure it is complete, clear and accurate.

When the RBC Planners were asked why the Foxlydiat Green Belt site name was changed, the reply was 'the SHLAA identifies parcels of land by location/street name. Brockhill West reflects a strategic site rather than a current land use designation in a particular location'.

One may say, okay, fair enough, however it is interesting that the site for Policy 31 is still referred to as 'Land to the rear of Alexander Hospital'. Let's ensure the rules are applied fair and evenly please. The number of dwellings for both sites is about the same, 150 for Brockhill West and 145 for the Alex.

There has been a complete and systematic removal of Green Belt reference for Brockhill West and this is unacceptable.

There are over 670 petitioners represented here today and many did not realise that Brockhill West was actually Green Belt and therefore made no representation to planning as part of the public consultation process for the CS in March 2011. There seems to be a total lack of transparency here. There is no excuse for removing Green Belt from the title and not having any reference to its Green Belt status. To thoroughly erase all reference to Green Belt cannot be explained as simply an error, oversight or simple mistake. There is no mention or explanation of the 'very clear exceptional circumstances' that exist to allow development on Green Belt as outlined in the PPG2 Green Belts report and there is definitely no reference in this report to the use of Green Belt for employment purposes, especially when there is currently, according to the Worcester Chamber of Commerce, over 1 million square feet of empty office and industrial space in existence in Redditch. In fact the PPG2 states quite the opposite and states that before building on Green Belt the council concerned should be encouraged to recycle old and disused areas.

What is Redditch Planning doing towards this recycling?

When asked this question at the public consultancy meeting for Brockhill they were totally unaware of the amount of empty office space that existed. You only have to drive around Redditch to see lots of empty offices so it really isn't anything new and therefore figures' should have been available at the time the employment land was included in the Brockhill West strategic site.

There has been a recent article published in the Redditch Advertiser Oct 12, where a Councillor actually makes a statement about empty housing and the need to re-cycle.

Brockhill West is quite a small site and is surrounded on one side by the Redditch/Bromsgrove Boundary and on the other by community woodland.

It is not adjacent to the existing Brockhill estate and there are no linking paths etc.

It really adds little value to the sustainability (perhaps none at all) and deliverability of the CS. It would only supply about 37 low cost rented social dwellings maximum. The landowner's questionnaire (LOQ) completed in respect of Brockhill West and the representation made on behalf of Persimmon by RPS for the CS show clearly that Brockhill West is seen by Persimmon and their agent as only an 'enabler' to allow them to continue building another 1,500 dwellings on the adjacent Bromsgrove Green Belt. Policy 30 actually refers to, in its

principals, a stream and an oil pipeline. Neither of these is actually on the current Brockhill West site within the Redditch boundary but do certainly exist on the site in Bromsgrove.

It is interesting that cross boundary references are being added ahead of any discussions on cross boundary expansion especially considering the references to Green Belt have been totally removed.

Also how can 150 dwellings justify having associated retail and employment land? It is obvious that this retail/employment development is consistent to the greater plan as shown in the RPS North West Redditch Concept Masterplan (Option 1). RPS supplied us with this and has informed us that Option 1 is the preferred option of Redditch Planning. This may add some bias to any decision Redditch Planning will take, when deciding a best and preferred option for cross boundary consideration and development.

Recently, Gallagher Estates Limited held a public consultation for the building of 212 dwellings on the non Green Belt land east of the railway line adjacent to Brockhill East/Brockhill ADR and this could, if passed, be able to replace the 150 dwellings scheduled for development on Brockhill West Green Belt immediately. An outline planning application has now been submitted to RBC Planning.

The SHLAA Process

Paragraph 4.3 in the SHLAA states 'assessment should involve key stakeholders including house builders, social landlords, local property agents and **local communities** plus other relevant agencies such as Housing Corporation and English Partnerships. The purpose of this involvement is to discuss and agree methods, assumptions, judgements and findings throughout the process to ensure the robustness and transparency of the Assessment. Appendix 1 details all members of the Redditch SHLAA Working Partnership which was formally established in October 2009'.

This working partnership has no local representation at all and considering approximately 1,000 dwellings are proposed for the Brockhill area this seems very unsatisfactory.

There should be another thorough and independent review process, this time involving the local community.

We believe this criticism of RBC Planning is fair and justified and is the reason why RBC Planning should not have sole control over the outcome of this petition.

Conclusions

If there was an issue hearing the petition on that particular evening i.e. because of the Brockhill ADR/Persimmon Planning Application being presented on the Wednesday following, the petition presentation should have been rescheduled.

We live in a democratic country and therefore should be able to openly present to Council on behalf of our petitioners. There should not be censorship of what can be said by the petition team, as long as it's true and not disrespectful. Finally, until the presentation was heard the outcome should not have been decided.

As Elected Councillors on our behalf and as guardians of the beautiful Green Belt land Redditch still has, we believe you should have the ability to discuss, speak and oversee this issue openly.

We therefore request that, the petition involves and is overseen, by some form of independent committee, to ensure it does not become just another objection to the CS.

Answers are required to questions raised from the petition presentation and some importance should be given to these, with associated timescales. This should be a formal process not an informal chat as recently offered by Ruth Bamford.