

**URBAN MYTHS
– OR GREEN BELT TRUTHS?**

Harpenden Green Belt Association

INTRODUCTION

- At an open meeting organised by the Harpenden Society on 20 October 2014, Cllr Daly, the Leader of St Albans District Council, gave a Powerpoint presentation.
- Part of the presentation involved the purported demolition of some “urban myths”, some of which are statements made by the Harpenden Green Belt Association.
- In this slideshow we explain why these are not myths at all.

URBAN MYTH 1: CAPACITY OF SITE S5 (NW HARPENDEN)

- We said: “The truth is that they will not fit all the houses that they want to build on a single plot to the north of Harpenden” (i.e. Site S5, NW Harpenden)
- They said: “Can’t fit 500 homes in S5 - *independent view: it can fit 500 or more*”
- For the truth, see the next slide.

URBAN MYTH 1: CAPACITY OF SITE S5 (NW HARPENDEN)

- How many homes you can fit on a site depends on how densely you want to build. The draft SLP (Policy SLP 13c) says NW Harpenden will have an overall net density of 40 dwellings per hectare; it also says the listed building at Cooters End Farm will be retained.
- A “net density” is calculated by taking 60% of the overall area of the site and putting houses on that, leaving 40% for infrastructure.
- Site S5 is 18 ha in total, of which the listed building comprises 0.9 ha – leaving 17.1 ha. 60% of that is 10.26 ha. At 40 dwellings per hectare (dph), that makes for 410 homes.
- The “independent assessment” SADC refer to is the Green Belt Review. This gave a range of 324 dwellings at 30 dph to 540 dwellings at 50 dph. But since then the Council has decided to use 40 dph and to retain the listed building.
- Moreover, the Council are also considering the possibility of building on only part of Site S5, south of Cooters End Lane. That is only 11.5 ha in total, and could only accommodate 276 dwellings at a net density of 40 dph.
- In order to justify their figures, planning officers have put forward various proposals which involve using, not only Site S5, but also land outside it, owned by the same developer. But they are not putting those proposals to the public in this consultation and they were not evaluated as part of the scoring of Site S5.
- The broad location which is shown on the plan for the consultation cannot accommodate 500 dwellings at the net density which the Council has chosen.

URBAN MYTH 2: ADVICE FROM HIGHWAYS

- We said: “SADC planners did not even consult the Local Highways Authority prior to proposing one of the Green Belt sites in Harpenden for building”
- They said: “SADC didn’t speak to highways – *we have*”
- The truth: SADC did not speak to highways before they determined which sites to release from Green Belt. This is obvious from the evaluation report which recommends particular sites: it records 2014 advice from Herts CC as education authority, but not from Herts CC highways. The decision as to which sites to promote for release from the Green Belt was made on 3 July 2014: we understand that the first time SADC officers met with highways was on 8 October 2014, two days before the consultation opened and after all the documentation had already gone to print.

URBAN MYTH 3: MEASUREMENT OF DISTANCES

- We said: SADC planners got measurements of distance wrong when they evaluated the sites and so treated a number of services and facilities being closer to Site S5 (NW Harpenden) and Site S6 (NE Harpenden) than they in fact are.
- They said: “Precise distance key to evaluations – *it is not, understanding relative distance is (but to help, detailed measurements now provided)*”
- The truth: SADC planners did not measure distances correctly when they produced the sites evaluation in draft. We and others told them this but they refused to correct their mistakes and gave wrong and misleading answers to public questions. They have now produced a report which they have posted on SADC’s website but not shown to councillors, which demonstrates that HGBA was right all along.
- We have never said that “precise distances are key to evaluations”. The purpose of measuring distances was to ascertain what mode of travel the occupants of new housing would use to reach services and facilities. The effect of the planners’ mistakes was that lots of services and facilities were treated as being within walking distance when in fact people are likely to use their cars to access them. So the errors made Sites S5 and S6 appear more “sustainable” places for development than they really are.

URBAN MYTH 4: NUMBER OF PEOPLE

- We said: “500 homes means 2000 more people moving into our town, 1000 more children in our crowded schools, 1000 more cars on our jammed roads”
- They said: “500 homes = 2,000 people + 1,000 children – *but average household size 2.5 = 1,250 people (including children)*”
- The truth: How many people come to live in 500 homes depends on what kinds of homes you build. That is not yet known. 500 single-bedroom flats will mean fewer people than 500 large family homes. Our calculations assume an average family of 4, including 2 children – the 2,000 people include the 1,000 children.
- We think that is a fair assumption because:
 - SADC have said that they particularly want to build more smaller family homes, 2-3 bed;
 - Developers in Harpenden want to build larger executive homes, 4-5 bed; and
 - Harpenden is particularly popular with families because of its good schools.

URBAN MYTH 5: OTHER SITES IN HARPENDEN

- We said: “3 further Green Belt sites, one to the south of Harpenden, another one to the north, and one in Batford, are candidates to be built on”
- They said: “3 Green Belt sites to north, east and south being considered – *they are not*”
- The truth:
- Section 8 of SADC’s own Summary Booklet explains that if a density less than 40 dwellings per hectare is chosen following this consultation, Site S6 in Batford will be required for building. It is bizarre for the Council now to claim the opposite.
- Section 4 of the Summary Booklet also explains that SADC’s figures only stack up if they build 500 homes on “minor” Green Belt sites. Two “minor” Green Belt sites have been identified, one at Falconer’s Field in north Harpenden, the other at Beesonend Lane in south Harpenden.

URBAN MYTH 6: OTHER SITES ADDED LATER

- They said: “More strategic sites will be added later – *strategic sites can only be designated in the SLP*”
- The truth: This statement does not appear in HGBA literature, but we do believe that other strategic sites are at risk. The risk is not that they will be added after the SLP has been finalised and adopted – the risk is that they will be added after this consultation, as part of the process of getting to a final SLP. This is because:
 - The decisions as to capacity and density of sites are not yet finalised – SADC admit that if a density figure of less than 40 dwellings per hectare is chosen, other sites are at risk; and
 - The plan on which SADC is consulting involves meeting all of its “need” for housing: if developers persuade an inspector that the “need” is larger than 436 homes per annum, more sites will be needed. SADC has not done enough to protect Green Belt in this event.

URBAN MYTH 7: MEETING LOCAL NEED

- We said: “There is enough non-Green Belt land in St Albans District to meet the housing needs of local people.”
- They said: “Enough land for “local need” without Green Belt – *not true, 800-1,000 more births than deaths per annum*”
- The truth: This all depends on what is meant by “housing needs”. The Council’s figures do not differentiate between those who genuinely need to be housed in the District and those would wish or desire to live here. Do you think that every child now living in the District is entitled to live in the District when they are an adult? If so, it’s probably right to say we would need to use Green Belt land to achieve that – although we don’t believe that the Council have done enough to investigate what can sensibly be built on brownfield sites. However, HGBA believes that there is enough non-Green Belt land in St Albans District to accommodate those who genuinely need to live here.