



Dear Sir

I am writing to express my concerns about the planning proposal of the Wheat Quarter for a planned substantial increase in the number of flats by raising the height to 10 storeys. It is also concerning that the citizens of Welwyn Garden City have no idea of what the local authority's view of the planned new dwellings is for Broadwater Road Developments as a whole, which in 2015 was a total of 850, but sense that has increased three-fold.

**Introduction**

I am afraid the Wheat Quarter developers have failed to understand the Garden City concept in submitting this proposal. To be direct about this

proposal I reject outright that we can have the density and height of such blocks of flats in Welwyn Garden City for the reasons outlined below. Indeed, the developers have undertaken little research of the town's history and produced a design which, on the face of it, is best suited to a London borough where there can be a demand for replacement housing and very limited alternative space.

It is perverse that the developer's vision for their development, which is within Ebenezer Howard's master plan for the heart of Welwyn Garden City, is to offer blocks of flats rising to 10 storeys high, whilst at the same time the citizens and community are celebrating the centenary of our garden city and the legacy of its founder. A legacy of healthy living and community spirit in an environment characterised as " a great place to work, rest and play".

Of course, we want more housing, we have waited at least a decade for this site to be developed, but we had reasonably expected that it would reflect the character of our garden city. Moreover, this development should recognise the capacity for housing on Broadwater Road and the housing plans for the car park area to the north of the station.

### **Health and Well-being**

My principal concern is the impact on the health and well-being of the residents who will occupy the flats of such height and density. People want homes that provide a safe haven with all the obvious household facilities, but equally, if not more so, a home that meets their emotional needs. Understanding the link between living in blocks of flats and mental health is crucial to protecting the well-being of the community living there.

Residents can often feel trapped in such accommodation. In their mind they ask themselves what happens in the event of incidents such as fire, and as we are learning from COVID, the threat of virus diseases such as flu which spread rapidly where hundreds of people share public space like corridors, stairs, lifts and limited shared amenity space. They can also face fear for their security, and being enclosed at height, and how to escape in an emergency. These are all feelings that develop with time and may not be evident when first taking occupation of the flat.

Sharing semi-public spaces with strangers can make residents suspicious. Their fear of crime, typically drug trafficking, which leads to isolation and loneliness, and threats beyond their front door. There can also be hurdles to cross in facing behavioural issues and differences with other residents. They may feel unable to have the pet of their choice. It is more challenging to sustain neighbourhood relationships in such buildings; and more difficult to

identify and handle disturbance from other residents particularly if you do not know them.

All of this can lead to higher incidences of depression, phobias, schizophrenia, with some individuals having suicidal thoughts and feelings. Sadly, early mortality is a feature of high rise living. Our Borough Council needs to be aware of the long-term financial consequences on their and the County's annual budgets in supporting the residents in such high-rise blocks of flats.

I am well aware of the social importance of all aspects of homes and housing as a Samaritan volunteer of more than 20years experience and having been a board member of 2 housing associations over 15years, one of which I chaired.

### **The Quality and Quantity of Amenity Space**

The proposed design of this development does not provide good quality and appropriate quantity of amenity space for the number of residents who will occupy these high storey blocks. To start with anyone familiar with high rise buildings will be aware that the wind speeds increase significantly at ground level and create turbulence on the top level in particular given the density of all the blocks. As for the top of the building having any intended amenity space - this is unreal given the safety issues at that level, and the neighbouring premises and pedestrians at ground level.

Although a number of the flats may have balconies only a small percentage will ever be used as an amenity due to lack of a view or sunlight and their close exposure to neighbours. In reality most balconies are rarely used for relaxation particularly if there is little privacy or no view other than the neighbourhood balconies. What they do offer is additional storage space and washing lines which irritates the neighbours because they are unsightly; though not so irritating as the neighbour above who waters the plants and soaks the neighbour below.

At ground level there is no space for a gathering, nor amenities for seating at ground level. Green grass will be minimal, there is no space for trees to develop or even flower beds, basically there is nothing that connects residents with nature. The amenity space at ground level is insufficient for the number of residents in the blocks of flats

### **Connectivity to the surrounding residential neighbourhoods**

With a 50% increase in the planned application the level of parking being provided is a gross underestimate of the parking needs and will cause significant neighbourhood concern, rather than maximising current and future

connectivity to the surrounding residential neighbourhoods. The neighbours beyond the development will resent their parking spaces being used by others. Moreover, the town centre will be troubled with additional parking demand, particularly in the evening, where there is continued ambition to improve the town's evening economy.

I believe some serious thinking is required with regard traffic flow on Broadwater Road and the impact this development will add. There are Issues around residents' vehicles arriving and leaving, the close proximity of the other blocks of flats on Broadwater Road with traffic noise and emission levels. Moreover, the personal safety of pedestrians of every age who live or visit the flats is a concern.

### **Preserving identified key views of the retained listed buildings and treasures**

I am sure this plan, with "spot the silo", will be unacceptable to Historic England as it does not respect the setting of the 1920 silos. These are a significant feature in the history of Welwyn Garden City and its status as one of the first Garden Cities in the world.

Has this design principle sought the approval of Gascoygne Estate where Hatfield House will now, I guess, have a line of sight to the 10 storey blocks of flats? I suggest the loss of an uninterrupted skyline from Hatfield House will concern of Lord Salisbury and the Estate Trustees, and Historic England, along with the great many visitors to one of the nation's finest historic house and garden open to the public.

### **The views of Secretary of State for Housing and Communities, Robert Jenrick**

Robert Jenrick would seem to support my views. On BBC's Any Questions (9/10/20) he said in the programme's discussion on housing that :

*"It's not about numbers alone."*

*"We should be building places we can be proud of now and in the years ahead and that they are worthy as homes and the community"....*

*"We want good quality homes working to the minimum space standards. No more rabbit huts!"....*

*"There should be access to outdoor space, tree lined streets; more beautiful homes with a sense of character."*

Very much sharing the views of the citizens of Welwyn Garden City. We want to develop what us good about Welwyn Garden City, not destroy what is good.

## **Conclusion**

My rejection of this proposal is not nimbyism. In summary we all know we need more homes, and indeed we know within WGC there are plans to deliver houses elsewhere as well as on Broadwater Road. Hopefully without completely exploiting this location and landing up with a ghetto in a few years time.

It is paradoxical that many of the first residents to settle in new homes in Welwyn Garden City in 1920 left the overcrowded areas of London after the Spanish Flu, the last pandemic, when 250,000 people died between 1918 and 1920. Importantly, in 2021 we want homes that primarily support healthy living and well-being. Indeed, that meet the needs of the post COVID-19 pandemic era we will enter.

In developing Broadwater Road, given its location, we should be developing a place of character that compliments the rest of our town centre and where people can enjoy living, working and visiting. The development should merit its place on Ebenezer Howard's master plan and be a place future generations can be equally proud of when they celebrate the town's bicentenary, and their appreciation for the legacy we have passed on.

Regards

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