

Housing densities on the Broadwater Road West site – an appraisal.

The Council's vision for Broadwater Road West is...

“To deliver an energetic and pioneering scheme of development which integrates the spirit of the garden city with the very best of high quality 21st Century design, seizing the opportunity to enhance the local environment and create a sustainable, supported neighbourhood of an appropriate scale, which successfully integrates with the local community”.

So said the Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council's Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) for the site dated 2 December 2008. The vision was very laudable, but all submitted designs have fallen well short of the brief. But despite the shortfall on the brief and the extraordinarily strong objections from many parties, including the Welwyn Garden City Society, WHBC accepted a design from ZMLC. And so must we.

Since the WHBC acceptance of the ZMLC plans there have been three applications from the construction companies now involved, attempting to increase the housing densities on the site. Whilst this might meet the aspirations of various Members of the Council I wish to point out very clearly that any increase in housing density is unacceptable and profoundly out of date with current planning thinking: anywhere, let alone in a proper Garden City.

The Garden City ethos put forward by Ebenezer Howard was based on the need to get away from the high-density housing of working-class households in Victorian Britain. At that time “back to back” terraces were being built to a density of around 100 dwellings/acre.

When the Shredded Wheat factory was being built on the site, the highest density housing being constructed at the same time in the town was around 11 dwellings/acre. Many of these houses, which were built on both sides of the town, remain fit for purpose and are highly sort after.

What is immediately apparent from the housing densities is that even the approved design for the site has a dwelling density in excess of that found in the London high rise estates of the 1960s and 1970s: a density that flies in the face of “*the spirit of the garden city*”, quoted in the SPD vision above.

The proposed increase in the number of dwellings on all three sites takes the dwelling densities to ridiculous levels, exceeding the levels in Victorian industrial towns that Howard sought so hard to eradicate.

To generate this increase in the number of dwellings on the site, the footprint of the towers has had to be increased as well as their height. Some of the blocks will be twice the Council's SPD maximum. The site will be encased in the more tightly packed high rise blocks, essentially removing the Grade II listed buildings from any view from the outside. Certainly commuters from the North will be unable to recognise that they are passing through WGC, and drivers down Broadwater Road will enter a canyon. The mass of towers will be clearly seen from the town centre and will obstruct the view of the grain silos: always felt to be a wonderful reminder of the town's industrial importance. Ebenezer Howard would be very concerned that his new statue on Howardsgate will be facing towards this potential intrusion into the town centre street scene.

The WHBC argument that increasing housing densities to this ridiculous level is acceptable, since it would reduce need to use Green Belt land, is illogical and flies in the face of the SPD

The tower block estates built in the 1960 and 70s are now regarded as failed architectural models that cannot support a high quality of life. And yet in a town set up to improve quality of life, the local authority is advocating a return to a failed concept that guarantees the opposite. If these proposed increases in density are allowed by the WHBC, the decision will kill the vision for the town and could well come back to haunt Members and Officials.

WHBC has a duty of care for the town, a town being considered for World Heritage Site status, and should be ensuring that the vision of the founders is enshrined in new developments. These new applications should all be refused. The present permissions do not meet the SPD requirements, nor did the SPD ever meet the aspirations of a true garden city. But some plans have been authorised by the Council and we have unfortunately to accept them.

We do not have to accept these latest applications for the site, nor should the Council. Housing densities of this magnitude are not appropriate for a garden city. Indeed post Covid 19 one might say anywhere.

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