

Statement by Theresa Villiers for examination in public for draft Barnet Local Development Plan

I'm proposing to cover in about quarter of an hour of opening remarks: housing targets, parking provision, car parks, tall buildings, and one or two further points relevant to the overall strategy of the draft development plan for Barnet.

I want to explain why I think aspects of this draft plan for the borough of Barnet are not 'sound' because they are not an appropriate strategy taking into account reasonable alternatives. Nor are they based on proportionate evidence.

For well over a hundred years since the spread of radial public transport in our towns and cities suburban life has been a key part of our society, our economy, and our culture.

Living within reach of the economic opportunities of the city centre ...but with more space to breath with quieter, leafier streets, closer to the green belt and countryside beyond is something which is hugely valued by my constituents.

A key attraction of living here especially for families is to get away from the pressures of high-density high-rise urban living.

I accept the need to build more homes but these must be the right homes in the right places.

I am deeply worried about the ever increasing pressure to urbanise the suburbs.

I have highlighted this in Parliament and I see it in this draft plan too.

The draft recognises that neighbourhood character should be an important factor in the planning process.

Page 119 would retain the current goal that density should be optimised rather than maximised.

Paragraph 6.11.1 it acknowledges the importance of considering the local context for each proposed development including whether it is an urban or suburban area.

And it rightly emphasises that acceptable density ranges need to relate to existing building form and massing.

This should be core to any responsible approach to planning and the built environment.

But I cannot see how these vital principles can survive delivery of housing targets at the level proposed in this plan.

The draft acknowledges that these targets are some of the toughest of any London borough.

I fear that the low-rise *outer* suburban character of my Chipping Barnet constituency will be under threat if they're set at the level proposed ...or even increased.

The number proposed envisage a significant uplift in building compared to recent years and that has already felt like being under siege, especially in areas such as Whetstone.

It is hard to see how these targets can be achieved without proliferation of blocks of flats in outer suburban areas for which they are wholly inappropriate.

Thankfully the 5361 per year figure referred to on page 34 of the plan ...which was generated by the so-called mutant algorithm no longer seems to be an immediate threat because of a u-turn by the Government.

So that leaves the 2364 figure from the London Plan and the 3060 from the Strategic Housing Market Assessment commissioned by the council.

I would strongly argue against the higher figure.

You will all be aware that 2364 results from the conclusions of the Independent Panel of Inspectors who considered the draft London Plan.

Often inspectors tend to raise targets.

The fact that even they thought that the 3134 figure in the initial 2017 version of the London Plan was too high should surely demonstrate that the SHMA number (which is only just below it) is excessive.

Delivering the SHMA total of 46,000 units would profoundly change Barnet and not for the better.

I appreciate that the London Plan and the SHMA figures have a slightly different status within the document.

However, as the Federation of Barnet Residents Associations have argued in their submission, it is far better and clearer to have one target rather than two.

Even if the 46,000 figure is used only as a trigger to identify sites I'm worried that it will still have a real impact on planning decisions.

Its existence will make it harder for the Barnet Council planning committee to turn down individual planning applications even if they amount to an overdevelopment, especially in relation to the sites identified and listed for potential development.

So my primary ask of this process is the removal of the 46,000 figure.

In my view, 35,460 number from the London Plan is still far too high, but I appreciate that it would need intervention by central Government to disapply the London Plan.

That is something which I hope might happen, following on from statements made by the Prime Minister during the summer, but we will have to await the new Planning Bill and NPPF to see if it will.

The second topic I want to turn to is parking, always a big issue in Barnet.

This draft plan rightly accepts that the private car is the dominant mode of transport in the outer suburbs and that Barnet has high levels of car ownership.

We are a car-based suburb.

That means that developers should be permitted and encouraged to provide good levels of off-street parking for new dwellings.

I would highlight the intervention made in March 2020 by the then Communities Secretary, Robert Jenrick.

He requested an amendment to the Draft London Plan to give suburban areas more flexibility to set their own requirements on parking.

He noted that reducing parking spaces risks more residents being forced to park on street, causing congestion to outer London's road network.

He was also highlighted the need for space for electric charging points to meet the deadline to end the sale of new petrol and diesel cars from 2035.

I acknowledge that the proposals set out in Table 23 on parking provision for residential development are less restrictive than those in the London Plan.

But I would like to see a higher level of provision.

I note that in several places in the draft plan, the council indicate that they will promote developments with few or no parking spaces where a shift to public transport use is expected.

But there is simply no evidence base to say that there will be such a shift.

The likely outcome is not a switch to bus and train use but an increase in cars from so-called car-free developments parked in nearby streets.

Of course, there is merit in encouraging active travel and public transport.

I fully recognise the benefits of cycling and walking.

But while our public transport system remains predominantly radial, our dependence on the private car will not change.

Even with better orbital and local lateral connections, the public transport network in the suburbs is always going to be sparser than in central London.

And however much we entreat people cycling and walking will often simply not be a practical option for the elderly, for people with young families or people with impaired mobility.

These groups, in particular, need their cars and it is hard to see them switching to bicycles whatever councils try to do, especially not with our hills in Barnet.

They don't call it High Barnet for nothing.

The plan contains repeated references to shifting to more sustainable modes of travel.

But there is no convincing explanation of how this will be done.

Two rail schemes are mentioned, one of which Crossrail 2 is years away and may never happen.

Remember, it took well over 30 years to deliver the first Crossrail (and it is still not fully operational even now).

Moreover, there is no current prospect of significant enhancements to the bus network.

We recently lost the Hadley section of 84 bus because of the failure of passenger numbers to recover after the pandemic.

This is just one illustration of the fact that the economics of bus passenger transit are more difficult now than they have been in years.

That brings me to my third point.

I would ask that the statements in the draft plan which indicate that the council will support building over car parks are amended or removed.

Our town centres in Barnet have struggled enough as it is.

If you build over their car parks, they simply will not survive.

And building over station car parks is completely unacceptable.

These are hugely important park-and-ride schemes.

Especially at the end of the line, these car parks are essential to get people on to the public transport system.

They also reflect the dispersed nature of public transport in the suburbs.

In inner zones, most people live within walking distance of a tube or railway station.

That is manifestly not the case here which is why there have been car parks at suburban stations for many decades.

The importance of the role of these car parks in our public transport system was acknowledged by former Transport Secretary, Grant Shapps, when he vetoed the proposal from TfL to shut Cockfosters station car park and build over it.

I would argue that plans to develop over station car parks at High Barnet, Woodside Park and Totteridge are removed from this plan.

Just a few final points to cover briefly before I conclude: I feel that the plan should be more restrictive when it comes to tall buildings.

The London Plan defines buildings of over six storeys as tall.

The Barnet Plan should adopt that approach rather than their proposed definition of tall buildings as ones over seven stories.

I agree that tall buildings should be confined to identified locations.

But as the Barnet Society point out in their representations, buildings of four, five or six storeys will generally be wrong for low-rise outer suburban areas and should not be approved there.

I am concerned about the idea of allowing tall buildings along the A1000 and East Barnet Road.

The latter road in particular is surrounded by low-rise suburban homes and eight storey buildings would be wholly inappropriate.

Nor should we force excessive development on town centres such as Chipping Barnet and New Barnet.

I'm concerned that 5400 homes in town centre locations is too much.

I would also emphasise that the identified housing need in Barnet is family homes.

Up to now, these have been defined as three or four bed homes.

This plan indicates that a two-bed unit could count as a family home.

I believe that change should not be made and that this provision should be deleted from the final approved plan.

We also need stronger protections to prevent the division of larger homes into flats.

Up to now, it has been the policy of the council to try to safeguard its stock of family homes by rejected applications to convert them into bedsits and flats.

I am worried by the submissions made by FORAB that the provisions on this matter in the draft plan are not strong enough.

So I hope their points will be seriously considered.

In conclusion page 111 of the draft development plan indicates that the character of the suburbs will inevitably change and that this process needs to be managed.

My plea is that we don't accept that the urbanisation of the suburbs is inevitable.

Amending this plan can make a difference in protecting the local environment and quality of life of everyone who lives in this borough.

I acknowledge that we also need changes in the rules at national level something I am pressing for.

But future generations will not thank us if we allow our communities to be disfigured by discordant overdevelopment driven by excessive and unrealistic housing targets.

And that is what I am here to ask you to prevent so we can save the suburbs.