

T. Weldon

Land off Midhurst Road

My name is Terry Weldon, a town and borough councillor, and for the past 6 years I've served on the HTC planning committee as vice chair, and then as chair. I offer these thoughts from my perspective in that capacity, drawing on what I have observed and learned during those years.

Here in Haslemere we have in the Neighbourhood plan, as in the Waverley Local Plan (and indeed in the National Planning Policy Framework) two conflicting demands. On the one hand, we have an obligation to protect our valuable green spaces, and especially areas designated National Landscape (formerly AONB). On the other, we have a competing obligation to provide sites for housing to accommodate a growing population. With extremely limited land available which is not formally protected as National Landscape, AGLV, Greenbelt or in some other way, it is just not always possible to meet both those demands. When it comes to specific applications, we have had to find ways to balance those conflicting demands.

In the case of this application for development on the Red Court site, the residents have been strongly opposed from the start, as has the Haslemere Town Council, which lodged clear objections when it came before our planning committee. Of these, the primary reason I want to discuss here was that it clearly conflicts with the Neighbourhood Plan commitment to protect all AONB / National Landscape land.

However, we are not NIMBYS. We recognise the competing need to provide sites for much needed housing, and indeed welcome development proposals where they are suitable. For that reason, we have in the past approved selected applications for development on AONB/National Landscape, where we believed the need for housing outweighed the importance of protecting the green spaces. How we weighed that balance, was by careful scrutiny of the details of the proposals, assessed against how well they met the two conflicting requirements.

We need to recognise that not all National Landscape / AONB sites are of equal value – some are of undoubtedly greater “natural beauty” than others, and some designated sites have already had some degree of development (what in current parlance are termed “greybelt”). We need also to recognise that while we need more houses, that need is not unqualified. What we really need is the right houses, at the right price, in the right place.

So, in assessing the application for the Royal School site, for example, we came to the conclusion that although located in an area designated as “AONB”, the particular street, comprising residential dwellings and two schools, scarcely merited the description “natural beauty”. As an existing school site, it was also partly developed. On that basis, we determined that the need for housing outweighed the AONB designation.

A more recent decision (not yet considered by Waverley BC), we supported an application for a development on the Longdene House site in Hedgehog Lane, where in the past we have consistently opposed previous applications. In this instance, the proposal differed from earlier ones because it included specific provision for genuinely affordable housing for social rent – and in addition we noted that although designated as National Landscape, the site was surrounded by screening vegetation, and so was not visible from local highways.

I come now to this specific application, and consider how the competing demands stack up against each other.

First, unlike the other sites where in my view the landscape value was a little questionable, that is not the case here. Its location on the southern border of the town, adjoining the South Downs National Park is important, and makes a most attractive entrance lined by an impressive series of trees. There can be no doubt that this site does indeed merit the National Landscape designation.

On the other hand, I am not convinced that the housing provided in the proposed development meets the three part test I outlined earlier – that it should be the right houses, in the right place and at the right price. This site is clearly not the right place, nor I submit, are they the right houses. The primary need in Haslemere is for smaller houses suitable for young families just starting out, and for older people scaling down – or for those employed in the town. They most definitely are not at the right price. Mean market prices for housing are currently something like 17 times mean local incomes. Even with a discount of (say) 30%, mean prices would still be something like 12 times local incomes – most definitely not genuinely affordable for local people, or for local workers.

On those grounds, I believe that while we do have a need to provide housing sites in addition to the need to protect National Landscape and other green spaces, in this particular application, the balance of weight must come down in favour of protecting the National Landscape.