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Standing up for Hertfordshire's countryside

Statement by Chris Berry on behalf of CPRE Hertfordshire as an interested party to planning appeal (PINS reference: APP/P1940/V/26/3378268) for Land to the East of Oxhey Lane, Carpenders Park

INTRODUCTION

1. I make this statement on behalf of CPRE Hertfordshire as an Interested Party to the appeal (PINS reference APP/P1940/V/26/3378268: Three Rivers District Council application number 25/1020/OUT) against the refusal of planning permission for 256 dwellings, a childrens' home and associated development on Land East of Oxhey Lane, Carpenders Park.
2. I have practised as a Member of the Royal Town Planning Institute in both the public and private sectors for over 50 years and am presently employed part-time as Planning Manager for CPRE Hertfordshire which acts to protect the countryside in Hertfordshire. We are active in supporting local organisations and communities to protect, amongst other things, statutorily designated protected open space such as Green Belt from inappropriate development in the wrong places.
3. CPRE Hertfordshire objected to the application in July 2025 and in the light of the circumstances of this appeal I make this statement on behalf of CPRE Hertfordshire and in full support of the Rule 6 party and local community groups represented as further interested parties.

GREEN BELT

4. The Government's commitment to protecting Green Belt land is elaborated in Chapter 13 of the NPPF 2024. The five purposes of the Green Belt are set out in paragraph 143, and, notwithstanding the Council's position, we consider the first, second, third and fifth of these purposes are directly relevant to the determination of

this appeal. Historically, Green Belt has been a key component of the planning system in Hertfordshire and in terms of the first Green Belt purpose its primary function has been to control the outward sprawl of London as the London Metropolitan Green Belt.

5. In the 1970s, the Green Belt was extended as part of the Hertfordshire County Structure Plan to cover approximately 40% of the land area of the County to continue to provide this protection. The form of the Green Belt in Hertfordshire and its primary purpose reflect the influence of Greater London along the main route corridors leading northwards from the capital and the major settlements in close proximity, such as Watford.
6. With regard to first of the five purposes of the Green Belt for this area, the primary function of preventing urban sprawl is exercised along roads such as the A4008 and the West Coast main line railway and other radial routes where pressure for development continues to be significant, including this site. Part of this primary purpose is to maintain the integrity of local settlements and specifically maintaining the rural character of the gap between Bushey and Watford.
7. The second purpose of the Green Belt, to prevent the coalescence of settlements is undoubtedly an issue in this case. It is impossible to ignore the cumulative effects of the rash of planning applications in southern Hertfordshire which is leading to the infilling of areas between settlements of all sizes, leading to almost continuous urban development immediately north of London.
8. Again, notwithstanding planning practice guidance regarding the size of settlements affected by coalescence, this application is contributing to the enlargement of Watford to the south and the filling of open countryside gaps between Carpenders Park, Bushey and Bushey Heath. Related to this, the third purpose, to safeguard the countryside from encroachment, is a significant concern in this case, particularly when set in the context of challenging the permanence of the Green Belt and the clear and obvious loss of openness which would result from the construction of 256 houses and associated development.
9. The magnitude of the proposal is a factor in our view and likely to become more so in the light of recent experience since the introduction of grey belt which has already led to significant potential reductions in the Green Belt in Three Rivers and the neighbouring Borough of Hertsmeire and the City and District of St Albans. As has been cited frequently, including the oft quoted Samuel Smith Old Brewery (Tadcaster) planning appeal case, openness is a matter of planning judgement which in this case would in our view be hugely impacted by the proposed development.

10. In relation to the fifth purpose of the Green Belt, the NPPF 2024 states that brownfield and previously developed land should be used prior to development on Green Belt (Paragraph 147). The Three Rivers Brownfield Register, which appears to be significantly out of date, identifies 53 hectares of brownfield land appropriate for development, sufficient to accommodate several thousand units depending on density. Notwithstanding the possibility of the implementation of consents since 2025, the Council's Brownfield Register indicates the potential contribution of previously developed land in Three Rivers.
11. The emerging Local Plan provides the opportunity for promoting greater use of previously developed land within the built-up areas of Rickmansworth and Chorleywood and elsewhere. The Government intends the reuse of previously developed land to be the primary land resource for development in the future so, together with unimplemented consents and empty homes, the need for using open countryside such as in this case may be reduced.

GREY BELT

12. The Government restated its commitment to the Green Belt in the NPPF 2024 which provided a significant change in the direction of travel for national Government policy with regard to the future of the Green Belt by the introduction of grey belt. These changes are intended to be reinforced by the draft NPPF which was published for public consultation in December 2025 (NPPF 2025).
13. Grey belt is defined in the existing NPPF 2024 as:
"Land in the Green Belt comprising previously developed land and any other parcels and/or any other land that, in either case, does not strongly contribute to any of the purposes (a), (b), or (d) in paragraph 143. 'Grey belt' excludes land where the application of the policies relating to the areas or assets in footnote 7 (other than Green Belt) would provide a strong reason for refusing or restricting development."(Glossary)
14. It is nevertheless clear that the Government's stated intention is to retain the Green Belt largely in its present form and the constant and increasing attempts to challenge Green Belt protections for residential and other developments lead to many local communities questioning the relevance of the planning system. CPRE Hertfordshire is not opposed to a limited reassessment of Green Belt boundaries where conditions and circumstances have changed from the original designation.
15. The present site self-evidently should not be considered as grey belt in any reasonable definition by virtue of its magnitude, undeveloped nature and contribution to the first purpose of the Green Belt in this location. In our view it is

effectively a clear extension of the southern boundary of Watford and thus constitutes urban sprawl which the Green Belt designation seeks to prevent.

16. Reference may be made to the recent appeal decision at Shafford Knoll Farm in Hemel Hempstead where the Inspector noted that:

“the NPPG identifies sites that make a strong contribution to purpose a) are likely to be free of existing development and lack physical features in close proximity that could constrain development” (ref: APP/A191/W/25/3373146)
17. Further, the appeal decision states:

“Whether, or not, a parcel of land constitutes grey belt , depends on the characteristics of the site itself and its locality (para 21).”

We believe that a similar position is appropriate with regard to the position and the character of this site which is an extensive area of totally undeveloped open land that should not be regarded as grey belt.
18. With regard to grey belt, it is noteworthy that virtually every major planning application for residential and commercial development within the Green Belt in Hertfordshire made since 12th December 2024 has identified the site as grey belt, notwithstanding the quality and character of the landscape or local conditions in each case. This is clearly an unsustainable position and it is becoming increasingly clear that the existing definitions and guidance on grey belt are entirely inadequate to prevent the wholesale removal of highly valued and significant Green Belt protections.
19. It is also undeniable in our view that the new planning policy context created by the revised NPPF has provoked a disturbingly high number of new applications and re-applications for sites which were previously refused permission. Whereas a proportion of such applications may warrant consideration for various reasons, the purposeful illogicality of the revised NPPF in supporting five purposes of the Green Belt (para 143) and then only permitting three purposes to be considered in applications (NPPF Glossary definition) is in our view unsupportable in this as in every other similar case.

VERY SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

20. The Appellant further argues that, if grey belt is not established, very special circumstances (VSC) exist where the benefits of the scheme would clearly outweigh the harm to the Green Belt. The VSC test should not be solely a mechanistic weighting exercise, but rather clear and powerful reasons related to the conditions and circumstances of the site that warrant a departure from consistent planning policy in favour of respecting and retaining the Green Belt.

21. The judgement regarding the VSC to be demonstrated to clearly outweigh the harm caused by this inappropriate proposed development should relate to the very special circumstances and conditions of this site in the open countryside. We do not believe that the benefits that the Appellant proposes pass the test of VSC in this location when much of what is being promoted would be expected of a large development in any location.

LANDSCAPE

22. A key characteristic of the designated open land affected by the proposal is the quality and extent of the rural landscape in this area and we would comment that the rural landscape and openness of this area is highly valued by the local surrounding communities. The paucity of open countryside in the area heightens the significance of rural landscape and character on the edges of urban areas as is being increasingly recognised, forming the basis of national campaigning recently initiated by CPRE.
23. We support fully the evidence provided by Ms Fisher on behalf of the Rule 6 party with regard to the strong contribution of the landscape to the Green Belt in this area and the unsuitability of its identification as grey belt. We regret that a landscape reason for refusal was not cited by the Council and note Ms Fisher's concern on the imbalance in the consideration of landscape matters between the Appellant's assessment and Place Services consultation response in the planning balance.

THREE RIVERS LOCAL PLAN

24. We believe that the status of the emerging Three Rivers Local Plan and continuing Government consideration of the significance of designated protected land, including Green Belt and grey belt are directly relevant to this inquiry. The previous Regulation 18 public consultation in 2021 received a record-breaking number of responses overwhelmingly rejecting the allocation of Green Belt sites for housing.
25. This led the Council to delay the programme for publication of the emerging Local Plan for further review and a further partial consultations with regard to housing sites took place in 2023 and 2025. Similar situations have arisen with regard to the emerging Local Plans for Dacorum and Hertsmere Borough Councils in Hertfordshire where very considerable local community responses and opposition relating to Green Belt allocations have led to the need to review the respective Local Plans.
26. Elected Members agreed a Submission Local Plan without this site on November 2025 and subsequently the Secretary of State for Housing Communities and Local

Government issued a Holding Direction on the Local Plan in February 2026 followed by a specific direction to the Council in March to include this and six other significant sites in the Regulation 19 Local Plan to be published. CPRE Hertfordshire deplores the Secretary of State's action and believes it is contrary to the intention of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 which places the primary onus of Local Plan preparation on the local planning authority.

27. We note that the Secretary of State quotes the parlous state of housing delivery as a justification for his actions and we would suggest that the context for the delivery of housing has been unusual since the end of the pandemic. Delivery of housing has been affected by a wide range of supply side factors including construction costs and materials, labour shortages, interest rates and financing constraints as well as constant changes in planning legislation.
28. We believe this situation will change in the future with the adoption of the Local Plan which could make sufficient provision without the allocation of this site, assisted by Government policy and actions to encourage housing provision as a whole as the Council moves rapidly to the next stages of Local Plan preparation and adoption. The constant attacks on the planning system as the cause of what is termed the housing crisis are in our view inappropriate and misguided.
29. The complexity of the issues surrounding the planning and provision of housing are ill-served by simplistic repetition of attacks on the planning process and the statutory protection of the countryside. Solutions to the urgent provision of housing in specific sectors are inevitably complex and the wholesale granting of planning consents on open and undeveloped land is largely irrelevant in this context.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

30. In summary, we believe the quantum of development proposed means that there would be very substantial harm caused to highly valued open countryside which is designated as Green Belt whose designation seeks specifically to prevent the type and magnitude of development proposed in this case.
31. The categorisation of the land as grey belt is entirely inappropriate due principally to its lack of compliance with the first and second purposes of the Green Belt to prevent urban sprawl, in this case from the southern boundary of the major settlement of Watford and the coalescence of settlements on the northern boundary of the metropolis. The anticipated changes to national planning policy and guidance still purport to maintain the significance of the Green Belt designation which is highly appropriate in this location and the Inspector is respectfully urged to dismiss this appeal.