

Planning Application 20260223

Outline submission for development of land off School Lane, Higham

This submission is on behalf of [REDACTED] we recognise that the way that we plan, build and populate our housing stock is fundamental to ensuring that we create a sustainable future. Decisions on housing impact significantly on the environment, social justice, health and well-being, and the economic prospects of all our communities.

Decisions on housing policy and the location of new development impact on the quality of life of existing residents and of newcomers. For these reasons, they inevitably generate significant interest, controversy and opposition. We believe that we need a more informed debate on the reality of our national and local housing needs and how best to meet them. Also, we need political leadership to win hearts and minds and to deliver solutions that reflect and address local concerns and views. We are reminded of Nye Bevan's philosophy in the face of the challenges of the post-war era and the housing crisis that faced the authorities: to focus not on building houses but on building communities.

We are aware that historically the response to new housing proposals in Higham has not always been knee-jerk opposition. We understand that residents welcomed the development of the local authority estate north of the A226 because of the opportunity it presented to re-house people bombed out of London and living nearby in poor temporary accommodation. We are not aware of any significant opposition to the expansion of the village in the 1950s and 1960s. We need to ask ourselves what has changed and what we need to do as a society to address the issues that regularly lead to opposition and hostility of the kind that this application has already registered.

The bigger picture

The figure used by the current Government as the national target for housing provision doesn't seem to be questioned. There is general recognition that we have a supply issue and a level of demand that has created an artificially high pricing structure and rent values in the privately rented sector. This has many consequences, not least on affordability and accessibility for up-and-coming generations.

This general acceptance of the starting point is not matched by support for the centrally imposed local targets, which direct proposals for provision in Local Plans. The rationale of these targets needs to be more transparent. Without this persuasive information, we have continuing controversy on the availability and viability of brownfield first versus land in the green belt, the shift of development away from the 'crowded' resource-depleted Southeast to the Northern Power Houses, the extent of empty properties generally, and in our urban centres in particular, needing to be brought into use, and the role and impact of New Town proposals as sustainable growth points.

The purpose of the green belt around our urban cores is not widely understood. Its role of keeping land permanently open and preventing so-called urban sprawl has been successful in these terms, and we have seen its expansion in recent years. Instead, perceptions are that the designation is about preserving scenic beauty and protecting wildlife and habitats. This prompts an emotional response to development plans which is difficult to counter.

The identification of ‘grey belt’ land for areas that are not essential to maintaining the integrity and impact of the green belt designation does, therefore, deserve to be communicated more effectively. Without such, the English rural idyll, the perceived irretrievable loss of our countryside and the loss of valuable farmland will continue to dominate the debate in areas like Higham. In addition, we need to get much better at explaining concepts like habitat and biodiversity net gain. Issues related to this aspect are outlined in Annex A. The strategy and support structures aimed at achieving food security also need to be communicated more clearly, including what it means for the behaviour and choices of individuals.

The current version of the Local Plan identifies sites in Higham that have been offered by the relevant landowner for inclusion in the plan. The absence of any other clear criteria for inclusion makes robust consideration of the viability and sustainability of individual sites at the planning application stage vitally important. In addition, this market led approach to site designation creates an evident tension.

The ambitions of site developers, and the accumulated pressures of development on infrastructure generally, are seldom matched by the ability of providers to meet changing and developing demands on their programmes. The Infrastructure Development Plan needs to be robust and realistic, and all the parties to it required to deliver accordingly. The planning system needs to be seen to make its contribution through adequate Section 106 provision and planning conditions that are enforceable and enforced. We would maintain that development consents should not be granted unless there is commitment to these expectations and they are met upfront.

Site specific issues

The area subject to the current application has been rejected on a number of occasions over the last 40 years or more. We are not privy to all the reasons, but we believe that they included restrictions of the boundary of the village envelope (now overtaken), density of development proposals, loss of an historic bridleway, impact on landscape because of the topography and the acceptability of access arrangements onto the brow of an increasingly busy through road.

These considerations and other limitations are still relevant. It will be important that they are given proper consideration at the outline and detailed planning stages if there is a presumption in favour of consent. They may be held to present insuperable obstacles, alongside other issues raised in representations from the community.

We do not wish to offer a view on the merits of the current proposals. We would, however, ask that environmental impact and climate change resilience issues are given full and demonstrable consideration in assessing the merits of proposals for this site and others that are in prospect in Higham. This should reflect the ambitions of the Council’s Net Zero strategy and include:

- Best practice 'cradle to grave' use of materials and construction techniques that reduce carbon footprints.
- Energy efficiency and use of renewable sources – we would hope that this would be designed in, and effective use made of scaled up ground source heat pump technology. Indeed, enabling adjoining properties to benefit from a renewable energy source that is cheap and secure could be a worthwhile means of offsetting perceptions of loss of amenity, detriment to property values. (On the latter point, is there evidence of such adverse financial consequences?).
- Demand management on water use, through designed in collection and distribution of grey water.
- Other issues that we understand are of concern locally:
 - Ensuring that outline development principles are not subverted by changed proposals at detailed planning stage.
 - What is meant by affordable housing and how to ensure that local needs are given priority and satisfied over London or regional requirements.
 - Alongside addressing physical infrastructure pressures upfront, ensuring that local employment opportunities and improved public transport arrangements are provided. Or, innovative schemes adopted to limit vehicle journeys, such as car sharing incentives or 'pool' cars.



22 March 2026

Annex A

Biodiversity considerations should be at the forefront of any future housing schemes in Higham. Mechanisms such as biodiversity net gain are mandatory and, when delivered on site, provide an opportunity to offer schemes that incorporate habitat for wildlife.

Whether delivering onsite biodiversity net gain or not, all housing schemes should have good green infrastructure in and around them.

The delivery of these green spaces needs to be in step with the distinctive landscape of Higham. For example, a developer might choose to incorporate a community orchard, a habitat that is in keeping with the area.

If development is to go ahead, Higham needs high-quality schemes such as maintain corridors for wildlife, for example including hedge planting, as well as providing accessible green spaces for people to enjoy.