

ELMBRIDGE LOCAL PLAN CONSULTATION 2019 - SUBMISSION

This is a submission in response to the Elmbridge Local Plan Consultation of behalf of the committee of Portmore Park and District Residents Association.

We have studied the indicative options put forward by Elmbridge Borough Council in public documentation and at the Weybridge consultation meeting, and we have informally canvassed preferences within the local community in north Weybridge.

Overview

In summary, we would support a sympathetic 'optimising' of urban areas – subject to some caveats, below – and a small degree of development on some 'weakly performing' Green Belt land so long as it minimises any negative impact on existing residents (indicative Option 2, with Option 5 in reserve).

We strongly oppose the options of 'intensifying' urban areas or wholesale release of Green Belt.

We have a question about how residents can help influence the evolution of the character of our town as housing density increases. We would also like more Local Green Spaces designated.

Rationale

1/ Intensifying urban areas in the way described in Option 1 would have an extremely negative impact on quality of life and the character of Weybridge and other Elmbridge towns. It would be wholly unacceptable.

North Weybridge is characterised by open and green settings, local open spaces, gabled buildings in Victorian and Edwardian style, and low rise development even in high density areas (e.g. terraced cottages), with larger buildings set well back. Intensification would significantly reduce the quality of life and damage the character of our town. It would remove some key reasons for living in Weybridge. A number of existing residents have told us they would want to move away.

2/ Large Green Belt release (Option 3) would again be a wholly unacceptable option. It would change the character of the whole borough, and make Elmbridge a much less desirable place to live.

3/ A small amount of development on Green Belt land appears unavoidable. It is essential this only affects weakly performing Green Belt, and is planned in a way which has minimum negative impact on existing residents: e.g. by incorporating wildlife corridors and local green spaces to soften the impact and give some visual separation of new development from old; also ensuring truly adequate infrastructure ahead of development.

We would support the level of Green Belt development suggested in indicative Option 2. We have concerns that, if larger areas of Green Belt are selected (as indicated in Option 5), developers will simply build on Green Belt first, before tackling more difficult brownfield/infill sites. But we recognise the value – if there is to be any building at all on Green Belt – of the kind of analysis underlying Option 5.

While we recognise that the 'performance' of Green Belt needs to be judged against defining criteria, we consider that some mechanism is also needed for residents to offer input into how Elmbridge categorises the significance of specific areas of Green Belt.

For example, the strips of Green Belt separating Weybridge from Walton are highly significant in preventing the two towns appearing to be simply part of one endless conurbation. They help define the towns. Some of these areas of Green Belt also have significant local amenity value, as well as being important to the landscape and urban identity (e.g. Cowey Sale, Desborough Island, the Grotto Road Recreation Ground and land at Broadwater Farm, Oatlands Park and allotments).

4/ 'Optimisation' of towns must not include development which leads to damaging intensification (including over dominant infill) and loss of character.

Some of the Proposed Urban Sites in Weybridge would significantly damage the character of our area. For example US401, the prominent triangle of green space between the southern end of Greside Road and Thames Street, has significant value in shaping the character of the area: it is visible from the Monument Green Conservation Area, and maintains a continuation of visual green and open character into the southern section of Thames Street.

5/ Local green spaces are essential to the character and quality of daily life in Weybridge. Losing any green spaces would remove some key reasons for living in Weybridge. We would like to propose further green spaces in north Weybridge including:

- green space between Greside Road and Thames Street (US401), reason described above
- the Grotto Road Recreation Ground (i.e. the football field at the end of Greside Road) which while already protected to some extent as Green Belt has high amenity value
- Cowey Sale Open Space, Walton Lane (Green Belt with high amenity value)
- Darnley Park Open Space
- Desborough Island, Walton Lane (Green Belt with high amenity value)
- Finnart Close Open Spaces
- 'The Grotto' Marlborough Drive
- Walton Lane Open Space (by Canoe Club & car park – riverside Green Belt with high amenity value)

Who shapes the future character of Weybridge?

At the 27 August consultation meeting, we were advised that a Neighbourhood Plan was really only useful where large scale development/redevelopment was planned. We were also told that with an increase in housing density, the character of a town would inevitably change.

Our question then is, how can residents help shape and moderate that change in the character of Weybridge, if not through a Neighbourhood Forum and Neighbourhood Plan?

Previous Elmbridge Local Plans have characterised sub-areas of towns in some detail – e.g. characterising Portmore Park Road as a 'Suburban Boulevard' – which has helped guide councillors in making decisions about granting consent to planning applications which affect character.

At present, planning officers can give advice based on national planning law and housing ambitions, with apparently insufficient regard to local factors such as an application's impact on the character and openness etc of a specific locality (e.g. St Catherine's, Beales Lane, Weybridge).

We are currently in a position where applications which local residents and councillors consider to have deleterious and damaging impact on the character of our town (such as Bridge House, High St Weybridge) can appear to be voted through by councillors from other towns, without the benefit of any strong specific guidance about making new developments fit with the character of our town.

Is there some way in which the local knowledge of residents and local councillors, and their aspirations for future development of their neighbourhood, can contribute to a formal source of such guidance on local character?