



The Hertfordshire Charrette: a step in the right direction?

*Parliamentary Candidate
Nigel Quinton considers some options for building new homes in Hertfordshire*

THE TERM "CHARRETTE" IS DERIVED FROM THE FRENCH WORD FOR "LITTLE CART." IN PARIS IN THE 19TH CENTURY, PROFESSORS AT THE ECOLE DE BEAUX ARTS CIRCULATED WITH LITTLE CARTS TO COLLECT FINAL DRAWINGS FROM THEIR STUDENTS.

The University of Hertfordshire ran a "Charrette" last month aimed at brainstorming ways to build the 83,200 housing units demanded by the East of England Plan by 2021. This was led by an inspirational architect/planner Andres Duany, who has built more than 60 communities in the US in the course of his career and is a champion of integrated planning, sustainability and, above all, good design.

I participated in three of the eleven sessions held. I have to report that it was an uplifting experience and could/should be a vital lead into designing a better Hertfordshire.

Full details of the events are at <http://www.go.herts.ac.uk/charrette> so I will not repeat them here.

The output will be two "books". The first is a presentation of six options identified as generic solutions to the development "problem"; each of these gets a thorough critique, a score using a system known as a "green print", and some well illustrated examples of how they could be implemented, using sites in Hertfordshire that will be well known and easily appreciated. This will then be used to conduct a public ballot on the alternatives presented.

The second is a new "planning guidance document" to be titled "Getting it Wrong – How NOT to build in Herts" containing 70 or more examples the team has gathered of planning mistakes across the county. Both of these documents should be required reading

for anyone with an interest in the future of our county.

So what are the six options? Well, none of the solutions are mutually exclusive and the county will doubtless experience all of them to differing degrees under different district frameworks. Indeed one of the easy criticisms one can make of this exercise is to ask just how all these fine ideas are in any way relevant to the planning process that we have at present. But before getting into the detail it is worth highlighting some of the context.

The scale of the problem?

According to the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) in the East of England Plan we have to build *at least* 83,200 "units" between 2001 and 2021 in Hertfordshire plus another 20,000 as potential overspill from Harlow and Luton. We have already built 26,163 and there are plans afoot for another 29,561, so the "problem" is finding spaces to put an additional 27,500 or so units by 2021 (plus Luton and Harlow extensions), and probably another 40,000 or so by 2031.

Generally this is perceived by everyone as a negative. Duany's premise is that this is not just because we have central government insisting that we build these homes, or that local plans have been over-ridden, but that all new development is seen as bad – and that this is a direct result of the failure of his profession – community planning – due to the

perceived failures of the new town experiment.

His conclusion looking back at the past century of building history is that from about 1930 onwards we stopped doing the basics right, and forgot how to build. Since then we have had one failed experiment after another, each more imaginative than the last but none going back to what we know works.

The options:

My version of the options and the scores presented at the end of the Charrette are displayed in the table below. It is probably unfair of me to present these numbers out of context. I just hope it will encourage you to go and read the reports when they are published – hopefully very soon, certainly within weeks, not months. Some of the ideas and concepts thrown



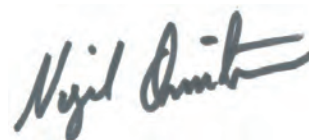
The six options and how they measure up:

Option	Description	Greenprint
Status Quo	Fight the RSS and carry on as we are – which will still see us build a lot of homes, but with no infrastructure gain and a continuous fight with central government – unless we can convince them to leave us alone!	23%
Settlement Extensions	Extending existing towns and villages. This is the current “default option”. It can be done better than, say, Great Ashby, but it scores poorly on sustainability, has no gain for existing communities –quite the contrary – and upsets more people than almost any other option	26%
Brownfield Infill	What we are doing already. The problem is we have been pretty good at this already so the potential is limited. It also lacks any mechanism to improve infrastructure.	53%
Satellite Garden Villages	Instead of adding to the edge of existing towns, develop a number of new villages. The new twist on the garden city concept is to link this to the Agro-urbanism concept which is catching on fast in North America, and may have synergy with the transition town movements and a move back to local food production. As Duany states, a village is, or was, a community dedicated to food production.	63%
Standalone Garden City	Self explanatory one would hope. Although requiring a complete change in the way units are allocated around the county, and having a long lead time, a new garden city could in theory provide all the houses we might need until 2050 and beyond. And there are areas of the county where this could be done, and development on this scale would bring infrastructure by necessity.	69%
Intensified Centres	A number of our newer towns, Stevenage, Hatfield being prime examples, lack urban density in their centres and there is considerable potential to increase the density of accommodation whilst at the same time improving the towns for everyone who lives there already.	71%

up by the process will be controversial – not least the very idea of building new settlements at all – as that will almost certainly involve some erosion of our green belt. BUT - if it can be done in a manner that compliments the existing settlement pattern in Hertfordshire, and extends the garden city concept, whilst providing a model of sustainability, then I for one do not believe we should set ourselves against it without considering the alternatives very carefully. And the alternative, more likely, scenario, is that we will lose our green belt to large bolt-on

additions to existing settlements, driven primarily by the location of the developers’ land banks. This does not mean I am suddenly converted to the case made by the RSS. If these ideas are to have a chance of coming to fruition then it will require a sea change in the way that Local Development Frameworks (LDF) are developed. It needs a coherent planned approach at a scale that is appropriate – bigger than a district, smaller than a region. A county, maybe?

To summarise, the reports that are about to appear should be of interest to all: they are definitely extremely well illustrated, I believe them to be well argued, and they will be provocative. They will also contain many elements of Liberal Democrat philosophy – community, sustainability, innovation and social coherence – and I would hope we will be very supportive of the process that has been started by the University and will contribute to it as it develops.




Thanks are due to the University of Hertfordshire for permission to use the images. Please note that the views expressed herein are the author’s, and do not reflect those of the Charrette team or of the Liberal Democrats.