

Liam Fox MP North Somerset



There has been a great deal of comment about the application by EPIC facilities to build a campus at Long Ashton in North Somerset's Green Belt.

Since this planning application has a wide range of implications beyond the specific site, I wanted to write, as your MP, to all Long Ashton residents setting out my reasons why I believe this proposal should be rejected.

The first and most important issue to raise is the Green Belt itself. The application of UK planning law in this area is set out in the National Planning Policy Framework which states that '[t]he government attaches great importance to Green Belts' and that it 'serves five purposes:

- (a) to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;
- (b) to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another;
- (c) to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;
- (d) to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns;
- (e) to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.'

'A local planning authority should regard the construction of new buildings as inappropriate in the Green Belt. Exceptions to this are:

- (a) buildings for agriculture and forestry;
- (b) the provision of appropriate facilities (in connection with the existing use of land or a change of use) for outdoor sport, outdoor recreation, cemeteries and burial grounds and allotments; as long as the facilities preserve the openness of the Green Belt and do not conflict with the purposes of including land within it;
- (c) the extension or alteration of a building provided that it does not result in disproportionate additions over and above the size of the original building;
- (d) the replacement of a building, provided the new building is in the same use and not materially larger than the one it replaces;
- (e) limited infilling in villages;

(f) limited affordable housing for local community needs under policies set out in the development plan (including policies for rural exception sites); and

(g) limited infilling or the partial or complete redevelopment of previously developed land, whether redundant or in continuing use (excluding temporary buildings), which would:

- not have a greater impact on the openness of the Green Belt than the existing development; or
- not cause substantial harm to the openness of the Green Belt, where the development would re-use previously developed land and contribute to meeting an identified affordable housing need within the area of the local planning authority.'

I do not believe that the current application meets these conditions for exceptional development.

A great deal has been made by EPIC about the potential for job creation, namely "the creation of 2000 highly skilled (degree level) jobs and 150 campus support jobs by 2040." Leaving aside the long time-frame here, most of these jobs already exist with the workforce situated in different parts of Bristol. The new site would therefore represent a necessary commute, increasing traffic on our already overloaded roads.

It is also worth pointing out that unemployment in North Somerset constituency is only around 1.5%, a third of the national average, and that few jobs that might be created are likely to benefit the local workforce for those seeking employment here.

While I have been impressed by the approach and sincerity of the company's leaders who genuinely want to build a top-class centre here, we must always remember that companies can change management internally or by external takeover, hence the current constructive approach cannot be guaranteed in perpetuity. That means that there is a risk that the undertakings given today about the avoidance of housebuilding cannot be guaranteed.

Once our Green Belt is gone, it will be gone forever. We are custodians of our local environment for the generations who will come after us.

I have been elected member of Parliament for North Somerset at eight General Elections and each time I have promised to fight to protect our Green Belt, so I hope you will understand that I have not made a balanced case for and against this planning application.

If successful, it could set a dangerous precedent by which other plans, in other parts of North Somerset, could be given the go-ahead to the detriment of our quality of life. I believe this is a risk that we cannot afford to take.

I hope this sets out my position clearly.



The Rt Hon Dr Liam Fox MP
Member of Parliament for North Somerset

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