



The Great Garden Grab?

Alastair Tod considers the current moves over 'brownfield' sites, and suggests that new housing developments are not currently the biggest threat to our gardens

In the last ten years or so there have been some 40 planning applications for housing on private land in the Forest Road area. Many of the applications were refused, but the remainder could have resulted in as many as 100 additional dwellings being built, nearly all of them houses, and most of them concentrated in one section of Forest Road. Apart from the loss of green space, environmentally-speaking the result could be described as 'architectural indigestion'. These developments in Forest Road have caused considerable concern in the rest of the town.

Government policy is for 60% of new housing to be on previously developed or brownfield land, including the sites of existing houses and their gardens. Much brownfield is vacant but it includes land acquired with standing buildings for development. Thus developers can buy up houses with gardens to demolish and redevelop their sites more intensively. The policy document specifically recommends 'additional housing in established residential areas' as one way of meeting the 60% target. Others have called this 'garden grabbing'.

In 2006 our MP Greg Clark intro-

duced a Bill to exclude gardens from the definition of brownfield sites. That Bill failed through lack of time. A second, similar, Bill has now been introduced that would enable local authorities to protect established gardens from development - to prevent them being used as an easy way of meeting housing targets. This new Bill is supported by the Royal Horticultural Society and by others. The Bill specifically seeks to protect local authorities from having their decisions overturned on appeal.

The context of these targets is new pressure to find land for house building. In Tunbridge Wells at present some 80% of house-building takes place on brownfield land, much of it previously commercial and industrial (ie true 'brownfield' sites). But if this supply reduces, the pressure will return to find an alternative source of land. This could mean greenfield land, on the edge of towns and beyond. CPRE estimates that nationwide more than a quarter of a million new homes will be built on greenfield sites in the next five years.

Much of our peripheral land has green belt or other protection. But still,

A recent garden development in Forest Road



in principle, the relative cost of brownfield development (including housing land) has to be weighed against a greenfield alternative, for example elsewhere in the borough. Greenfield building is usually cheaper to the developer, but imposes extra costs in transport, road congestion and utility connections – apart from whatever price is put on the loss of a rural setting.

The debate can be quite colourful. When introducing the new bill Caroline Spelman MP claimed, ‘the impact (of the present definition) on the environment, infrastructure and people’s quality of life has been disastrous..... The gardens being concreted over are leaving a malign environmental legacy’. The other side sees her proposal as ‘designed to save nice middle-class people from losing their views and having riff-raff.... in their enclaves’. The Government emphasises flexibility in its guidance, and claims local authorities already have

the powers they need.

There is some substance for this here in the 2006 adoption of more specific policies. The current Local Plan stipulates that development ‘(shall) not result in the loss of significant buildings, related spaces, trees, shrubs, hedges, or other features important to the character of the built up area or landscape’ - which would appear to protect gardens.

The Council is now starting to identify land to meet the borough’s target of 6,000 dwellings by 2026 - we await with interest what they propose. However the ‘garden grabbing’ issue concerns departures (ie when a garden site development on land which has **not** been identified for housing is either approved by the Council or refused and then approved by an inspector on appeal) - how robust will the Tunbridge Wells Local Plan actually be?

So what is happening now in our immediate area of Royal Tunbridge Wells? In the last six months the Society has considered about 400 applications of all sorts. Fewer than 30 of these related to development of new houses on private land, probably but not necessarily a 'garden'. Nearly all were for a single house. By contrast 116 applications were for ground-level house extensions - conservatories, garages etc, usually from owner occupiers. This suggests the main loss of gardens now is to those adding to their own living accommodation.

The Society has made representations in a number of these cases, on subjects including design, scale, materials, access, parking and landscaping. In general our approach is not necessarily to oppose new development but to judge what is gained against what is lost.

As to the current position with planning authority refusals being considered on appeal, since last summer the Council's refusal in four 'garden grabbing' cases was upheld.. One where the inspector reversed the Council's refusal was for 7 flats in Culverden Down, a steep site in an area of detached houses, where the flats were to be built into the slope of the hill. Here indeed the strong local objections were mainly to the principle of flats in an area of houses and gardens.

A larger recent case concerned a courtyard of 14 homes proposed for a

site of more than an acre near Dunorlan. The site is now occupied by two detached houses and adjoins other potential development sites. We questioned the applicant about the number of houses, landscaping and impact on the Park, the lack of affordable housing, and traffic generation. In the end we accepted that he had effectively safeguarded trees and screened the houses from the Park - we felt the loss of gardens was balanced by the quality of a well-designed scheme which would be largely invisible from elsewhere. However we did write to the Council asking to discuss the co-ordination of development on adjacent sites, and the lack of affordable housing (15 homes being the threshold at which the requirement for affordable housing is triggered). We have not yet had a substantive reply to this request. Meanwhile the Council has refused the application - we wait to see if the applicant will appeal.

On this limited evidence it does not seem that 'garden grabbing' at present is a major issue, at least in the form originally feared of blocks of flats in areas of houses. With increased pressure on land it may become so, and the Society will continue to scrutinise proposals, and to monitor the Council's decisions. To HG Wells our town was 'clean and open, and just pleasantly absurd.... protected from over-much breeding of little villa residences'. It's up to us to keep it so.