



**3, Swindon Hall
Church Road
Swindon Village
Swindon Village
CHELTENHAM
GL51 9QR**

Cheltenham Borough Council

01242 521723

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The Joint Core Strategy

You will be aware that there are several groups opposed to the Joint Core Strategy as it stands. We have been arguing for some time that its assessment of housing needs has been based on ONS statistics that the ONS itself says are not the right ones to use for this purpose. Councillor Ian Bickerton has pointed this out a number of times and provided chapter and verse regarding the correct approach to this analysis. So far the JCS team have failed to accept this. However there are a number of ways of cross checking the statistics.

In the ten years up to the 2011 census the population of this area increased by 5.7%. However the Joint Core Strategy proposes building 33,200 houses over the next 20 years, a 24.3 % increase in housing stock. The two figures don't balance very well.

Bath, a town not dissimilar to Cheltenham, is going through the same core strategy process. However even after a first look by the inspectorate demanded certain additions they are looking towards a 16.7% increase in housing over the same 20 year period. Now if this rate of increase was applied to the JCS area it would show that the JCS area needs only 23,000 houses – over 10,000 less than the JCS team estimates. This agrees very closely with the calculations based on the correct ONS figures.

Our JCS has identified brown field sites for 18,500 houses meaning that 14,700 have to be built on green land, most of it green belt. However, if the JCS team were to use Bath's rate of growth only 4,500 would need to be built on green land.

The area can find room for this number of houses. The JCS plan shows a large park area to be built on part of the army depot at Ashchurch. It is clearly not necessary build a park on green land next to open country and then build houses on the green belt. The 'park' could take 1,600 houses in addition to those already planned for Ashchurch. This is confirmed by the AMEC assessment of future sites.

In addition there are 4800 empty houses in the area; bring half of these back into use. Such action still attracts the new housing premium.

There are other non green belt options which could take their share.

In other words, room for 4,500 houses can be made available without touching the green belt. We will, of course, be prepared to put the correct figures before the Inspectorate when the time comes which could cause difficulties for the JCS at a late stage in the process.

So why are the JCS team trying so hard to break into the green belt? Our guess is that it is because the council's senior executives want to avail the area of the government's house building premium. This could be worth millions, but it will not be available for ever and so it is essential to

break into the green belt as fast as possible. Hence the reason for paying consultants to boost the requirement numbers so as to show that we do not have a five year housing supply and then using the threat of giving developers free reign to push councillors such as yourselves into going along with the grand plan and, in some cases going against their manifesto promise.

However, if JCS were to adopt Bath's level of growth none of this would be needed.

There is much talk at present of the democratic deficit – this consultation is a prime example of such and we are taking steps to ensure that it is recognised as such nationally.

So be aware that if the Officers and Elected Members do press ahead with plans to build on the green belt it will be done through your choice and not through necessity.

Yours sincerely

B J Simon
For Save The Countryside