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Dear Ray

Thank you for your presentation to Horsell Residents Association on Friday evening. The Borough has made much progress over the last few years and there is a clear sense of strategic direction which is absent in much of Government. The issue however is whether the strategy is right for the town and the broader community.

In terms of housing, the Borough has two requirements. First it must provide more housing to meet anticipated need and the proactive and leadership role the Council plays in Woking is commendable. Secondly, it must look at its existing housing stock and address the manifest problems that we have.

These are particularly pronounced in the Walton Road area of the town. Many of the houses are of poor quality with inadequate amenities. A large number are rented, overcrowded and, I suspect, many of the landlords are exploitative. There is also probably wholesale fraud in terms of the non declaration of separate units of accommodation in single hereditaments and rents charged which reflect a cost of Council Tax but for which no Tax is actually paid. This is a matter that seriously concerned me as a tribunal chairman dealing with these issues in London and the South East until I reached the statutory retirement age for judges this July.

Walton Road is adjacent to the town centre and crying out for strategic renewal. Only the Borough Council can provide this strategic renewal and with thoughtful renewal it is an area that possibly could meet much of the needs for housing as well as providing new and improved accommodation for those who currently live there. A mixed community with medium height apartment blocks interspersed with open space exactly meets your aspirations. This would be entirely in harmony with the adjacent town centre. But such work is more demanding than the 'big fixes' and certainly less glamorous.

The big question last night, which was little addressed by the questioners, was the issue of high rise development in the town centre. If my calculations are correct, from what you said on Friday, it seems as though, with developments undertaken, approved and proposed, we might expect to have 13 high rise (defined as being in excess of 100 m) structures in Woking by 2025? This is in an area which is probably no greater than 400 m by 200 m. This is equivalent to 0.03

of a square mile. Are you aware as to how this compares with areas of intensive high rise development such as the City of London and Croydon?

The City of London is 1 square mile. By my calculation there are 22 high rise blocks (in excess of 100 m) actual, approved and proposed in the City. Let us say two times Woking **BUT** in an area 30 times larger. Woking will have an intensity of high rise 15 times that of the City of London!!!

What about Croydon? There are 9 high rise blocks actual, approved and proposed in a City centre far larger than that of Woking: again, an intensity of high rise development far, far lower than Woking.

There were two elements in your presentation style that I felt to be unfortunate. The first is that you seemed to take great pride in the fact that Canary Wharf and Leatherhead would have a view of the Woking towers. You made great play of the fact that, at street level, people do not look up. Yet you seem proud of the fact that the long distance views across the countryside for all residents in north Surrey will be blighted. A good view for the few, an eyesore for the many.

This accords with the second element to your presentation. On Friday, you played the fear card – there is no alternative to building high in the town centre other than to build on the Green Belt. You brushed aside, and correctly, the question about brown field sites. You did not mention however the alternative approach set out above which deals both with a current serious housing issue and might meet our need for additional housing. In that context, the threat you made to be both irresponsible and unreasonable.

The final concern I have is to understand the imperative that drives this obsession with high rise development. I suspect you answered it on Friday evening when you indicated that 90% of the Council's revenue was derived from commercial activities – which I understand to be from land acquisition and sale, property development and property management. It is several years since I studied the Green Book but I really would be concerned were the town centre developments to be required to ensure that the Council is able to service and manage its considerable debt. To me, the Council should be an enabler for development: not to be so beholden to its own debt burden that it has forsaken its primary role to serve the long term interests of the wider community.

This letter is written to you as a concerned local resident who wishes only for the best for Woking. It is not party political and I am in no way involved in the management or direction of the Labour Party in Woking.

Yours sincerely

**Paul Blagbrough**  
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