DIOCESE OF ST ALBANS
Living God's Love

Hunsdon Parish Council

Attn: Mr Frank O'Shea, Chair

By email: councillor.oshea@hunsdonparishcouncil.gov.uk

16 November 2026

Dear Mr O'Shea

Re: Proposed development of glebe land at Hunsdon

I am writing on behalf of the St Albans Diocesan Board of Finance regarding the proposed development of diocesan glebe land south of Hunsdon, specifically a recent mail drop from Wates Development around the community undertaking a short period of early consultation on their development proposals.

We understand that the parish council is convening a meeting to discuss the matter and that there is considerable local concern about the Diocese's actions in continuing to promote the land for development, given the significant housing growth planned in the area. I am therefore providing this letter to the parish council to provide some explanation; and I am content if you choose to share it with attendees.

Why does the Diocese develop its land?

The land in question is diocesan glebe land. Historically, glebe land belonged to the local clergy person as part of their appointment to office as a source of food and income. Local priests would either farm the land themselves or rent it out to local tenants for revenue.

In the 1970s, the Church of England recognised that there was significant income disparity for clergy between parishes under these arrangements. The church undertook major reforms that changed the nature of its property ownership with the aim of equalising clergy income. One of these was to gather up management of glebe land from each priest to the Diocese, to be managed collectively and professionally for returns that would directly fund the payment of stipends to clergy by the Diocese.

The church measures (legislation) that govern the management of glebe land are very strict on diocesan boards of finance, and rightly so. We are required to manage glebe land for the financial benefit of our clergy stipends fund, the provision of local clergy being core to the mission of the Church. This is a higher bar than merely managing real estate assets for "best value" per the Charities Act requirements on charitable bodies, where "best value" can encompass social value as well as financial value.

In modern asset management, this means we don't just manage assets for an income return from tenancy but also for the best capital returns that can be achieved from sale, because that money can then be invested in other financial assets to provide continued funding for frontline ministry in local communities. Agricultural returns on land are extremely low in comparison to other asset classes, and residential development generally achieves the highest capital returns on land for our clergy

stipend payments. The maximisation of our glebe assets is crucially important to underpinning the presence of the Church in each community across the Diocese.

The St Albans Diocesan Board of Finance owns around 3,500 acres of glebe land across Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire. All our properties are under regular review for opportunities to maximise the financial return in line with our statutory obligations. We are guided by our professional agents who assess demand in the housing market and from developers when considering which sites to market and promote.

What is the nature of the relationship with Wates Developments?
In answer to enquiries about the specific nature of the current agreement with Wates Development, we would like to clarify that the land has not yet been sold. The DBF has signed a promotion agreement with Wates that allows them to pursue planning permission. It would only be if planning permission were granted that a sale would proceed and development would follow.

As part of the process of seeking planning permission, there will be a period of public consultation during which the Parish Council will be a consultee. We welcome Wates engaging with the community via a public mailing now, ahead of submitting a planning application. This is in addition to the formal statutory consultation period required by a planning application.

Bloor Homes' previous planning application at this site in 2017 did not succeed; however there have been changes to planning policy in the interim period and the DBF would be remiss in our obligations to not continue to seek to maximise our return.

What about local objections to development?
The DBF's Glebe Committee, responsible for managing glebe, recognises that there is often strong local feeling and opposition to further development in local communities, due to concerns about infrastructure, schooling, traffic, and other matters. This is not unique to Hunsdon and is reflective of planning, economic and social policy in England over several decades.

It is not the Diocese's role to predetermine these matters in how we manage glebe, and indeed we would be in contravention of our fiduciary obligations to allow concerns about these things to pre-empt our efforts to prudently manage for good returns by maximising what can be achieved through planning. It is the role of the local authority, the planning system, and the statutory provisions for public consultation to ensure the concerns of local communities are considered.

It is also worth noting that we rely on our development partners to engage in the planning process in conjunction with our external agents, rather than diocesan staff being involved directly. The diocesan budget is primarily funded from local parish contributions, so we are accountable to our parishes for what activity the efforts of our staff are put toward. We do not have the internal level of activity or capacity to effectively engage in the planning process directly, so our professional partners are best placed to do so as the most efficient use of the resources entrusted to us.

Nevertheless, we are keen to do what we can to support local communities from within our statutory and resourcing constraints. Housing accessibility and affordability is a recognised challenge for many. You will have noted that Wates' proposal includes affordable housing, which would become available to those unable to house themselves in the open market. We have seen examples of local lettings policies for developments in villages, where local connection is taken into consideration by the Local Authority, when allocating affordable housing and would support an approach like this if development is permitted here. At a national level, the Archbishops' Council have established a Housing Project that aims to assist dioceses and parishes in bringing forward housing exclusively for affordable housing.

The Church of England recognises that housing growth is an important matter of national policy, discussed extensively in its 2021 "Coming Home" review. The review concludes that the housing crisis is not inevitable, and that as an institutional landowner present in communities, the Church has a role to play. I welcome that the Parish Council is providing local leadership, supporting discussion and awareness in the village, so that local views can be clearly shared as part of the upcoming application.

Sincere regards



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