

9 October, 2019

Mr. C. Haigh,
Head of Planning,
Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council,
The Campus,
Welwyn Garden City AL8 6AE

By email only

Dear Mr Haigh,

Welwyn-Hatfield Local Plan Examination

Birchall Garden Suburb

You will recall that following the joint Hearing session with East Hertfordshire, in January 2018, I issued a note that set out a way forward on a variety of matters, concerning Birchall Garden Suburb (BGS), that were either in dispute or about which the evidence base was unsatisfactory. In the note and at the Hearing, I particularly expressed concerns as to the soundness of the proposed development between the A414 and the copses to its north, partly because of this site's prominence within this part of the Green Belt but also because of other considerations, including heritage and wildlife considerations. I requested that various independent assessments be carried out with regard to the suitability of this area for development as well as in relation to other parts of BGS.

I had hoped to hold a comprehensive hearing session before the end of this year in an effort to resolve the outstanding issues at BGS and to be able to arrive at an understanding as to which parts of this site could accommodate development that would be found sound and consequently what the dwelling capacity for this site could be going forward. Given its size and original suggested dwelling capacity, such an outcome would, I am sure, be particularly helpful in assessing how much other Green Belt land would need to be released in order to enable the plan to meet its overall dwelling requirement.

Although it is now some twenty months since I held the Hearing and wrote the note, during which time the Programme Officer has made numerous requests for the receipt of all of the required information at an early date, I note that there are still gaps in the evidence base and some of that which has been submitted does not appear to be fit for purpose.

With regard to the southern part of the site, I specifically requested a comprehensive assessment of the suitability of this area for residential and educational development in the context of noise, atmospheric pollution and seepage/leaching from the landfill site. I specifically pointed out that occupiers of properties in a location such as this should be able to enjoy their gardens on summer evenings, without recourse to excessively high acoustic fences and their living accommodation with open windows at these times. I also asked for an appropriate detailed plan of this area demonstrating the area necessary to provide adequate appropriate mitigation in the above context. This should facilitate an accurate assessment of the actual potential within this area for housing development, assuming there is any. I should add that in this context I do not consider contrived housing layouts to be appropriate in this area or indeed to meet the principles of the Garden City concept.

I have still to receive any information on atmospheric pollution or a plan showing the necessary mitigation. I also note that the landfill and noise documents have been prepared on behalf of the site promoter. Such a course of action is hardly likely to be seen as objective by some of the representors. A subsequent independent review of only the pollution report appears to have been prepared on behalf of yourselves but to date there is nothing independent before the Examination concerning noise and atmospheric pollution.

There is now unlikely to be time for such documents to be posted and consulted upon before the deadlines for evidence at a December Hearing. In my note I asked you to separate out the southern part of the site and to undertake a separate Green Belt assessment for this area. In the circumstances, I now consider the most appropriate course of action is to treat the whole of the southern area as a separate new site that is subject to a separate sustainability assessment. Would you now please do this and bring this separate site back to the Examination next spring along with all of the new Green Belt sites. I expect all of the information pertaining to this site requested in February 2018 to have been appropriately produced by then and for the site's sustainability and suitability for release from the Green Belt to have been considered in comparison with all of the other potential new Green Belt sites.

I propose to hold a Hearing in December to consider all of the outstanding issues remaining on the northern part of BGS. In this context I note that you were to re-examine the general location of the Green Corridor across BGS in consultation with the appropriate stakeholders (para 4 of note). Nothing concerning this has yet appeared on the website but I presume that you have had discussions with the relevant parties. If you have not already done so would you, undertake this work as a matter of urgency and include the consideration of the appropriateness of the land immediately to the north of the A414 as the location for the main element of the Green Corridor but supplemented by linkages between the areas of high importance for nature to the north across the reclaimed refuse tip area in your discussions.

If you are unable to agree a strategy with the wildlife stakeholders, then I would be grateful if you could prepare an agreed table for the hearing identifying the specific points of agreement and disagreement between the parties for consideration and discussion at the Hearing. Once the consultation period for the land quality assessment is over, I would also be grateful if you would conduct a similar exercise with the stakeholders who make representations on this aspect and prepare a similar table for consideration and discussion at the Hearing if there is not agreement.

Yours Sincerely

Mel Middleton

Melvyn Middleton

INSPECTOR