



Colin Haigh
Head of Planning

Reply to: address as below
Date: 15 November 2019

Melvyn Middleton
Planning Inspectorate
c/o Programme Officer
louise@poservices.co.uk

Dear Sir

Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan Examination

I write in respect of on-going correspondence about the timescale for our Local Plan examination.

You will recall that I wrote to you on 9 October 2019 setting out a timescale which included committee meetings to consider additional sites in December 2019 and January 2020 and hearing sessions on outstanding matters in early December 2019 and new sites in February/March 2020.

Your response letter dated 31 October 2019 states, in summary, that you accept the revised proposals in principle but questions just posting additional material onto the examination website and asks the Council to consider the appropriateness of a further round of consultation. It then goes on to identify a possible timetable, should that be necessary, which includes four weeks of consultation and hearing sessions in February and March 2020.

In addition to these events, the Government has called a general election on 12 December 2019 which creates a period of purdah from 11 November 2019.

All of these issues were highlighted to councillors at our Cabinet Planning and Parking Panel on 31 October 2019 and it was agreed that the Head of Planning would engage with the Planning Portfolio Holder and the Returning Officer in order to draft this letter.

The Returning Officer has decided that it is inappropriate to publish officer recommendations in respect of possible new sites in early December during purdah. This position is further informed by the fact that an elected borough councillor will be standing in the general election. As a result, this needs to be delayed until after 12 December 2019.

For the same reason the Returning Officer has decided that it is inappropriate to host hearing sessions on housing evidence, employment evidence, the plan period and the northern part of Birchall Garden Suburb on 11 December 2019 during purdah. As a result this also needs to be delayed until after 12 December 2019. We confirm that it is possible to host these sessions on 16, 17 and 18 December 2019.

Officers are in the process of revising the municipal calendar to reschedule many of the political meetings due to take place during purdah and this will include the CPPP meetings scheduled for 12 December 2019 and 17 December 2019, Cabinet meeting scheduled for 6 January 2020 and Council meeting scheduled for 7 January 2020. I will re-write to you as soon as new dates have been confirmed.

The Leader, Planning Portfolio Holder and Chief Executive also consider that if any period of consultation is to be included in the timetable then it should be hosted by the Council, for six weeks in accordance with the Statement of Community Involvement and that results should be reported to councillors before being submitted to the examination, so that they fully understand the views of residents and others before a final decision is made.

As a caveat I would highlight that the decision to consult on sites submitted as part of the call-for-sites was felt to be necessary by councillors, so that they could understand the views of residents before making any final decisions on new sites. They understood that you were keen to see the timetable progress on a critical path and felt that this was more important than scheduling consultation after they had selected new sites. The Council did not ask whether respondents would want to participate in subsequent hearing sessions as part of the consultation questionnaire, as at that time we did not know whether it would be possible.

Subject to the revised municipal calendar we anticipate that it will be possible to arrange CPPP and Cabinet meetings in January 2020. If six weeks of public consultation is deemed to be necessary, then it would have to take place and conclude in early 2020, before local election purdah starts in late March 2020. However, it would no longer be possible to schedule hearing sessions during this period and these will instead have to be rescheduled for summer 2020.

I would strongly assert however that the circumstances referred to above are not being taken as an opportunity to delay important decisions. The Council and its councillors fully appreciate the importance of the Local Plan to deliver housing, maintain prosperity and protect the borough's important natural and historic place. You will appreciate following the receipt of over 10,000 responses to the call-for-sites consultation that it is no easy task to decide which sites to select for development. Councillors wish to ensure that whatever decisions they take are fully democratic, fully justified and fully defensible.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Colin Haigh', written in a cursive style.

Colin Haigh
Head of Planning