

Response to the Inspector's request for consultation on EX221 by Cllr Paul Zukowskyj

Dear Sir,

I write in response to the council's review of windfall – EX221

1. It is noted that in the table in EX221: 1.9, the 'other uses' row covers accumulations of windfall projections from the following current uses: Community Facilities, retail, business uses. The footnote (6) then states the 'other uses' category specifically excludes the following uses: offices, education, residential institutions, utilities, leisure, parking and garages, public houses, warehousing and distribution and motor trade.
2. The exclusion of offices is justified, as a separate line is provided in the table for office to residential conversion. The exclusion of the other categories is not well explained and the justification for such exclusion is unclear.
3. There appears to be no allowance for the excluded categories in the windfall assumptions tables in 1.9 and 2.6.

Education:

4. Firstly, I would focus on the exclusion of education. The table in 1.5 indicates a consistent, albeit relatively low, supply of windfall housing from educational sites across the previous plan period.
5. Education sites such as the University of Hertfordshire and the Royal Veterinary College have yielded very significant windfall numbers over the last two decades.
6. School sites such as that on Filbert Close and at Onslow St Audrey's school (albeit both of these school sites are proposed allocated sites in the current submitted local plan) have yielded windfall numbers in the past (Filbert Close) and will continue to yield significant numbers of houses across the plan period. Known sites are of course included in the plan and are not windfall, but they do demonstrate education sites have consistently come forward for residential development.
7. There are a significant number of educational sites across Welwyn Hatfield and with the growth of housing stock envisioned in the plan, even more will be needed. Many of the existing sites will, however, not be in the right location or correctly sized for the need, and it could be anticipated that a number might indeed come forward for disposal and redevelopment for housing.
8. A good example might be the situation with St Mary's in Welham Green. The current school site is constrained and too small to allow the school to expand. Should a new site be offered to release constraints on development, HCC would be sure to expect a two form of entry school and subsequent closure of St Mary's on the current site.
9. What exactly do WHBC then believe would happen with the current St Mary's site? That it would lie derelict in the centre of the village for want of a use? Any reasonable person would conclude that it would very likely come forward for residential use, yet the site would be considered 'windfall'.
10. Further examples are present across the local authority area, and yet it appears that in the latest assessment of windfall potential, as well as in the previous assessment in table 1.9, no allowance is made for windfall from education over the plan period (it being excluded from the 'other uses' category, there appears to be no entry in the table that encompasses the windfall from that use class).

11. I would suggest an allocation against education across the plan period would be reasonable. I note 'agriculture and rural buildings' is listed as 4 per year between 2023/24 and 2035/36. Given the previous yield of ~8 per year from education shown in the table in 1.5, it seems to me there is compelling evidence to suggest an allocation of 8 per year over the same timeframe would not be unreasonable.

Parking and Garages

12. As with education, it seems yield from parking and garages is excluded from 'other uses' (see 1, 2 and 3 above) and therefore no allocation is made in the windfall assumptions.
13. This is despite yield of, based on the table in 1.5, approximately 6 per year across the previous plan period.
14. In the recent past, WHBC has undertaken redevelopment of a small number of garage sites for housing, most specifically delivery of social (council) housing, the housing type acknowledged in the submitted local plan as demonstrating the highest need.
15. In the previous financial year, WHBC looked to redevelop five garage sites.
16. WHBC is currently undertaking a property and land asset strategy update, and the portfolio-holder and deputy council leader, Cllr Duncan Bell, agreed at the Full Council Budget Meeting on 1st Feb 2021, to include an aspiration in the strategy update to delivery 200 new council homes from the land holdings of the council, focused on redevelopment of garage sites, within the next few years.
17. The Liberal Democrat group proposed a specific budget amendment that included a major uplift in disposal of garage sites for residential redevelopment in the next four years. Whilst this was defeated, the proposal clearly suggested to the administration that there were significant benefits and advantages to delivering such a programme.
18. None of the sites these dwellings would be constructed upon are allocated sites and therefore the entire 200 yield would be windfall. Were the programme of 200 dwellings to be undertaken and achieved in less than the plan period (remembering the tabled proposal and the asset strategy are for a period significantly shorter than the local plan) the historic yield from garages would be over-reached in very short order.
19. It is possible that the current administration will be replaced post May's scheduled elections. It is unlikely, however, that a single group will have an outright majority. If the Lib Dems are able to influence the future direction of the council, the garage redevelopment programme would be a key aspiration of the new administration. I suspect, given the financials of the programme, the Conservatives would also likely want to deliver a similar programme of redevelopment.
20. It seems reasonable to conclude, therefore, that the windfall from garages should be included in the future projections and recent trends in delivery of such sites should be used as a more robust guide to the numbers deliverable from that source. Policy changes and asset strategy aspirations would suggest a significant yield from this source going forward.

Conclusion

21. The exclusion of potential windfall from education and parking/garages, given the issues and evidence presented above, suggests the projections in EX221 are unrealistically low and pessimistic.
22. I would propose an uplift of projected windfall of 104 dwellings across the plan period (8 per year 2023/24 to 2035/36) for educational land yield
23. I would further propose an uplift of 208 dwellings across the plan period (16 per year 2023/24 to 2035/36) for garage land redevelopment

24. A review of windfall from other excluded categories and revision of the categories included to better reflect the historic yield, especially given the current government's predilection for expanding the remit of permitted development, is indicated by the two exemplars included in this submission.
25. I would expect the conclusion of such a review to identify further overly pessimistic assumptions and result in a more sensible windfall projection over the plan period of a number in excess of 2000. Since the historic average windfall has been 173, over 13 years this would yield 2,314, even an uplift to 2000 could be seen as overly pessimistic.
26. Getting the windfall correct is clearly a critical calculation. Overly pessimistic projections would result in allocation of more green belt sites than the need actually requires and the result of that would likely be the build out of green belt release sites in preference to constrained urban sites, leading to urban deterioration through 'mothballing' of windfall urban sites rather than their timely redevelopment.

Cllr Paul Zukowskyj MSc FRGS

Welwyn Hatfield Borough Councillor for Welham Green and Hatfield South

4th February 2021