

Central Herts Green Corridor Group Comments on Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan Examination document EX227: WHBC Note on Birchall Garden Suburb December 2020

I agree with Ian Davis' separate comments (of 8 February 2021) on EX 223 and EX 227, which I do not reiterate here but instead make additional reinforcing points. I also agree with Kate Harwood's comments on EX 223 and EX 227, which I attach as appendix I.

I. Green corridor and access arrangements

I agree with Ian Davis and Peter Oakenfull's expert substantive comments that the proposed loop road serving the site would cut across the Green Corridor and create significant ecological damage to the key assets there which we have highlighted to WHBC and the Inspector. This would need to be factored in. I agree with Ian Davis and Peter Oakenfull that there is therefore no way that BGS could deliver effective net biodiversity gain. Any such claims must be carefully scrutinised by independent experts and take due account of the proper baseline of assets and their ecosystems services there that would be impaired.

II. Sustainability Assessment: Need Update and correction of flaws in original SA

I agree with Ian Davis that the loss of the shops significantly affects the site's sustainability assessment, which therefore WHBC need to update for this revised proposal. This update must address the major specific and fundamental criticisms that we submitted on their original SA. In particular their SA fails to address the critical points that the Inspector has rightly raised. We concluded then that "These failings and shortcomings all suggest that BGS is not sustainable and certainly less sustainable than the other possible additional sites in relation to the sustainability criteria set out in the NPPF". Since WHBC appear to be ignoring my and others' earlier comments, here are some of the main supporting comments on this:

- Contrary to the Inspector's demand, WHBC did not consult with key stakeholders such as Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust or the Green Corridor Group nor take account of their evidence.
- WHBC fail to spell out the feasibility, effectiveness and costs of mitigation measures.

This revised proposal is certainly less sustainable and therefore this conclusion is even stronger in respect of it. Accordingly I agree wholeheartedly with Ian Davis' comments and conclusions on EX 223 that BGS should be withdrawn and replaced by better alternative sites on the basis of a more objective assessment.

III. Too many outstanding matters are left to Master planning, which is too late for this complex, complicated and controversial site. For example clarification is needed on:

- the note says that "master planning work will assess the green corridor and its required width in more detail.". I agree with Ian Davis and Peter Oakenfull that the currently revised proposal would significantly damage the Green Corridor and the ecosystems services and assets it has to protect. The Master planning will not be able to correct this and other problems (see below) and will just set in stone (or tarmac) these damages.
- How wide does their green buffer need to be to protect the brook from contamination by leachate from the former landfill site? Can it be provided feasibly and viably under the current plan?
- Remediation measures needed and their costs to treat contamination from the former landfill site.
- An appropriate land management strategy that "will also be required";
- Their proposed Baseline Summary is to analyse existing information, research and community. But WHBC and Tarmac have steadfastly ignored the views of local experts (including those on the Green Corridor Group); so we have no confidence that any such baseline information will be accurate or appropriate.

IV. Viability and deliverability

Given all of the above points and Ian Davis' and Kate Harwood's specific comments on the risks and costs of providing infrastructure for this development (eg road across the former contaminated landfill site etc), I also have significant concerns regarding the site viability and deliverability. I and Kate Harwood submitted comments on WHBC's CIL consultation, which "just in case" WHBC ignore them (again – as they have done for all our submissions on the green corridor and the key assets and essential services that need to be protected and enhanced in line with), I highlight below my key points on CIL for the Inspector's benefit.

- The CIL charges do not cover the costs of providing the water, sewerage and sewage treatment for the various developments in the Local Plan.
 - WHBC fail to reflect the severe water supply problems that Affinity will face in the near future – as shown in Affinity's and the Environment Agency's latest assessments,
 - Providing sewerage and sewage treatment for this site raises significant problems and extra infrastructure requirements. But WHBC fail to ensure that these costs are fully determined and fully included in the CIL payments to be made by the developments.
- WHBC do not allow for the high costs of remediating the contaminated land at this site, about which there was considerable concerns and debate during the Inspector's hearings. WHBC and Tarmac have still not adequately set out an adequate remediation plan – let alone fully costed it. .
- WHBC should first assess fully the infrastructure costs. Then do the viability assessment. They have done the reverse. If a site cannot cover its full (infrastructure) costs, then it is just not viable and should not be included in the Local Plan and should be replaced by alternative sites with lower costs.

Therefore I agree with Ian Davis that WHBC's site viability and sustainability assessments for SDS2 Birchall Garden Suburb are now so out of date and fundamentally and empirically flawed that this proposed site is clearly not viable and effectively undeliverable. It should be replaced by alternative better additional sites that are viable and merit proper consideration and inclusion.

Jonathan Fisher, BSc (Econ), PhD
Central Herts Green Corridor Group
8 February 2021

Appendix I: Kate Harwood's Comments on EX 223 and EX 227

Hertfordshire Gardens Trust, a member of the Central Herts Green Corridor Group, has the following comments on the EX227 Note on Birchall Garden Suburb prepared by WHBC

Site Capacity

The proposed capacity of 600 dwellings, an increase of 100 on the previous proposal, moves further away from Garden City Principles. These state that density of housing should decrease further from the town. At 30dph, this is too high if a mixture of housing types as stated is to be included.

Green Corridor

The Green Corridor proposed in this document is crossed by the main vehicular access including the bus route. The proposed housing is also immediately adjacent to the Commons LNR and Commons wood. With no specification for the buffer width, it would appear that these features would militate against a fully functioning Green Corridor to include the required net biodiversity gain as the Green Corridor Group has detailed in earlier Examination Hearings. Further the provision of a Community Hub adjacent will increase footfall to the detriment of the biodiversity.

Setting of Heritage Assets and Green Belt Boundary

The provision of a green buffer along the A414 would destroy the open aspect of the countryside and the long views which are part of the setting, and therefore significance, of designated heritage assets at Essendon, and of Hatfield parkland. The listed Holwell hyde farmhouse is also immediately adjacent to proposed housing and the setting will be harmed. The provision of a school as indicated would also harm the setting of the heritage assets and the green belt. It also seems perverse to subject children to the possible levels of pollution, from being set between a tip which releases leachate of possible toxic qualities, Burnside and the busy A414, as emerging research demonstrates. HGT has argued in the past that the level of screening around Burnside would also be harmful to views and settings due to the rising ground behind it.

Viability

No up-to-date viability assessment is included for this site. Given the amount of infrastructure required with roads, water and sewerage to serve the proposed housing plus the cost of proposed screening and the remediation of the former landfill site (as yet unknown as no detailed study has been made) to render it safe for residents, it would require a great deal of investment, HGT commented on the WHBC CIL consultation In November 2020 that

'A development scheme cannot be viable unless it can cover all costs which must include a reasonable contribution to the infrastructure provided by local authorities and others which is needed to support it.

Without these calculations it is impossible to determine whether the different rates of CIL suggested with their very generous buffers, would be adequate. For example, the region is the most water stressed in the country, roads and railways need upgrading to cope with the influx of new residents, and so forth.'

We therefore consider that more detailed consideration should not wait till the Masterplan stage as that will be too late for assessing green corridor width and remediation. The proposed Baseline Summary must take into account all evidence, including from the independent experts submitted during the Examination hearings to help inform the viability assessment.

Kate Harwood

Hertfordshire Gardens Trust (a member of the Central Herts Green Corridor Group) has the following comments to make on EX223 Treatment of Green Belt Boundaries of allocation in the Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan Note by WHBC.

Site SDS1 WGC4/4a Panshanger and Extension

Development at these sites will cause harm to the settings of the designated Registered Park & Garden of Panshanger (II*), the undesignated Locally listed parkland of Marden Hill and the Listed Buildings of Marden Hill House (II*), Marden Hill walls and garden buildings (II), and Tewin Church (I). The rising ground at WGC4/4a means that the sites will be very visible across the river Mimram valley. Screening should be within the site so as to be higher up the slope to reduce the impact of these developments on the significance of the heritage assets.

Site SDS2 WGC5 Birchall Garden Suburb

We consider that screening any development outside of it in this location would lead to the loss of the open views across the Green Belt , particularly along the A414 where views along the A414 and across the valley to Essendon are important, as well as being part of the setting for heritage assets.. Screening at this site should be within the site and further from the A414 and that a reduced DPH (dwellings per ha) should be proposed, to reflect the land used for screening and the low DPH required by Garden City Principles.

Kate Harwood