

Examination of the Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan 2013-2032

Inspector: Melvyn Middleton BA(Econ) DipTP DipMgmt MRTPI

Programme Officer: Mrs Louise St John Howe

8 August, 2019

Mr. Colin Haigh, MRTPI
Head of Planning
Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council

BY email only

Dear Mr Haigh

Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan Examination

I refer to Ms Tiley's letter of 14 December 2018, the subsequent conversations between herself and Mrs St John-Howe, about the examination's future timetable and culminating in your letters of 11 and 27 March 2019 with attached timetables to conclude this examination. You will recall that in agreeing the necessary work to take this examination forward to its final stages, I asked for such a timetable at the close of the Hearings into your stage 3 Green Belt Analysis on 7 November 2018. However, it took until the following March for one to be finalised.

Unfortunately, only four months later, I am told by the Programme Officer that you will be unable to discuss any proposed further sites, to accommodate the significant under provision of housing allocations to meet the housing need established at the outset of the Examination, at the Hearings programmed in November. In consequence, that aspect of these Hearings will inevitably have to be delayed until the New Year. In such circumstances and given the need for consultation on main modifications, there is no likelihood that this examination will be concluded at the beginning of April 2020 or indeed in May of that year as originally suggested in your letter of 11 March 2019.

Furthermore, a comparison of your previously agreed timescales, with actual events, also reveals that although consultants were appointed as planned to undertake landscape sensitivity work in February 2019, the stage one report that was due in June has still not been published and similarly the Stage 2 Green Corridor work due in July has also not been published. The inference from this is that there is likely to be yet further delay.

This has already been a long examination and such circumstances, where changes are made over a long period, can be difficult for representors and communities to engage with. There has already been significant criticism from a number of participants in this respect. In addition, a protracted examination can be a very costly use of public resources, not least from the perspective of the Local Planning Authority.

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You will recall that at the Hearings into the plan's strategy in October 2017 a number of participants urged me to find the submitted plan unsound and end the Examination at that point. I came to the conclusion that the fundamental soundness problem was an inadequate set of housing land proposals to meet the Objective Assessed Housing Need then advanced by the Council. I considered this to be mainly caused by the lack of an in-depth assessment of the contributions various sites adjacent to the urban areas make to the purposes and openness of the Green Belt. In consequence, if that could be established, then either exceptional circumstances to take additional land out of the Green Belt, to meet the housing shortfall, could be justified or if not, there could be a justification for a housing requirement and supply which is lower than need.

At the time that seemed to be a relatively straightforward process and indeed in verbal discussions at those hearings your officers seemed confident that the Examination could be concluded by the spring of 2019. As things have turned out that estimate is a considerable underestimate and could be seen to bring into question the appropriateness of the pragmatic approach that I took at that time.

In addition, we are still awaiting reports on the implications of noise and air pollution from the A414 for potential residential development in the southern part of the Birchall Garden Suburb proposal. These reports, along with further information about the safety aspects of the former landfill site, at the heart of this proposed development area, were requested at the close of the Hearings in January 2018, now some eighteen months ago. The latest agreed programme suggests that this should have been published along with all the other supplementary information relating to this proposed development by May 2019, with any necessary consultation being undertaken in June. None of this has yet happened.

I asked for an objective assessment of the ramifications of traffic noise and air pollution for living conditions in locations close to the A414. The Programme Officer tells me that the report's delay has been caused by a failure to agree the report content with the site developer. However, as the site developer will have every opportunity to make its views on the study known at the forthcoming hearing, I do not consider this to justify the lengthy delay that has occurred.

Furthermore, I understand that a peer review of the reports on the chalk dissolution features, originally submitted by Save Symondshyde and the response by Wardell Armstrong, on behalf of Gascoyne Cecil, appears to have been shared with the landowner some time ago whilst only very recently being sent to the representor. Again, this is another example of an action that is not conducive to a speedy resolution of this issue.

It seems to me that regardless of the slippage that will affect the timing of Hearings into the additional sites, there is no justifiable reason why Hearings to conclude matters at Birchall Garden Suburb and any other non-Green Belt Site

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matters should not go forward as programmed in November. I would therefore ask you to publish all outstanding non-Green Belt site material immediately so that consultation can take pace in a timely fashion and allow any necessary Hearings on those outstanding matters to take place in November.

In conclusion I would also ask you to revise the agreed timetable immediately, putting forward realistic time periods and milestones for the conclusion of all of the outstanding tasks, including the Hearings. In assessing this I would urge you to re-examine the nature and extent of the work being undertaken so that only that which is genuinely necessary is undertaken and the timetable can be brought back on track as much as is possible and the delays beyond April 2020 brought to a minimum. If that is not possible or serious slippage continues to occur, then I think we should consider the option of you withdrawing the plan with a view to re-submitting it for Examination when the work is finally completed and there are no obvious soundness issues accompanying it.

Yours Sincerely

Mel Middleton

Melvyn Middleton

INSPECTOR