

22 December 2020

Mr. Colin Haigh,
Head of Planning,
Welwyn Hatfield District Council

By email only

Dear Mr Haigh

Welwyn-Hatfield Local Plan: - Interim Findings

1. Thank you for your letter of 30 November, setting out your Council's response to my Interim Report on the Local Plan Examination. Your submitted sites statistically meet the requirement to have deliverable housing proposals that would meet a Full Objectively Assessed Housing Need (FOAHN) of 16,000 dwellings and thereby comply with the requirement of paragraph 135 of my Interim Report. However, unless the FOAHN is substantially reduced, following further examination, I am not convinced that together these sites would meet the soundness requirements set out in my report.

Soundness matters

2. Whilst that report was not intended to be a comprehensive response to the soundness issues that beset this Local Plan, it nevertheless sets out my thoughts on some significant matters of soundness that have a basis in the basket of sites that were before the Examination at that time and in the context of the plan's strategy.

3. In particular I referred you to the minimisation of the need to travel and in para. 32 to the unusually high reliance of the Borough on a workforce supply that resides elsewhere but largely commutes by car. I also referred to the on-going infrastructure requirements and movement inefficiencies associated with this. Paras. 33 and 130 help to explain why it is specifically desirable to boost the supply of housing within the Borough.

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4. At paras. 102-105, in discussing the plan's objective to maintain the existing settlement pattern and in consequence to direct a limited amount of new development to the excluded villages in a proportionate and movement sustainable way, I refer to an apparent but unjustified bias in the proposed distribution. At para 41 I also refer you to the requirement to provide a five-year supply of housing sites, upon adoption, unless there are very good reasons to justify an alternative approach.

5. Although inviting you to take these observations into account when submitting additional sites to the Examination (para. 106), that does not appear to have comprehensively happened.

Green Belt exceptional circumstances

6. In discussing some of the larger sites that you have put forward for removal from the Green Belt, I explained that the exceptional circumstances necessary to justify such action is much more than the Borough's overall housing need. The removal of each site has to be justified on an individual basis and that needs to include an assessment of site considerations from a number of perspectives and in a comparative way.

7. Harm to Green Belt openness and to its statutory purposes is a primary consideration but as we discussed at the relevant Hearing sessions and I explain in para 42, the Stage 3 Green Belt Review has a number of limitations. Consequently, site selection in the area's affected by Green Belt cannot be driven solely by Green Belt Review considerations and the weight attached to the different levels of Green Belt harm needs to be tempered to overcome the Review's deficiencies.

8. I concluded in a number of instances that I was not yet satisfied that there were exceptional circumstances justifying the removal of these individual sites from the Green Belt, the most notable being the Symondshyde new village proposal. The missing evidence largely revolves around the better suitability or otherwise of alternative sites from a sustainability, as well as a Green Belt, perspective.

The way forward

9. I intend to examine the new sites that you have recently submitted to the Examination and which are adjacent to the excluded villages, together with those that have emerged within the urban areas, in the early part of 2021. I will also examine the changes to the FOAHN that could result from the publication of the 2018 household forecasts at the start of that process.

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10. In order to move the above matters forward and enable me to be able to make an objective judgement on the priority that should be given to the development of different sites, within the Green Belt, I also propose to examine all of the sites adjacent to the excluded villages that passed your site selection process in 2019.

11. In addition, as noted in my Interim Report, very little development is proposed at Digswell and Oaklands–Mardley Heath. There may be sound reasons for this, but none are specifically before the Examination. As there are no sites in either of these locations that passed the site selection process, I propose to examine the evidence that led to the rejection of Dig 1 and OMH 6, 7 and 19.

Potters Bar Urban Extension

10. At para. 120 and 121, I refer to Cuffley’s movement sustainability credentials in a Welwyn–Hatfield context. It seems to me that the same arguments could be advanced with regard to Potters Bar, which is not even located within the Borough and about which there is no information about local employment supply, commuting patterns or development proposals.

11. Notwithstanding this, you seem to wish to introduce a large site that would be capable of accommodating about 700 dwellings and located immediately adjacent to Potters Bar. This is a very late stage in the Examination to be introducing, what could become a significant time delaying matter, into the Examination process.

12. Nevertheless, your reference to the Potters Bar urban extension is expressed in the context of it being a safeguarding proposal. Additionally, that it should only be identified for release during the plan period, if I considered such to be necessary to meet the established need for housing during the last five years. However, you correctly point out that even that eventuality could only be advanced through a review of the plan or as a joint action area plan to be prepared with a neighbouring authority. Such a conundrum suggests that this site would not pass the delivery test within the foreseeable future.

12. This proposal, in its current format, has not been the subject of rigorous public consultation and I have no wish to begin that exercise for such a site at this stage in the Examination process, particularly given its delivery uncertainties and my observations above about the sustainability of this location in the context of the Borough’s existing concentrations of employment and population.

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13. You refer to the site being released from the Green Belt and safeguarded for development in a post plan period. Nevertheless, the extent of evidence before the Examination does not suggest that even this way forward could be found sound, without delaying the adoption of this plan even further.

14. However, more fundamentally, we discussed the question of safeguarding land, at my initiation, at the stage 5 hearings. Having listened to your evidence, I concluded that apart from safeguarding small areas of land, in appropriate circumstances, that are located adjacent to sites that are being removed from the Green Belt to meet the development needs of this plan period, then it was not an appropriate course for this plan to take. I have seen no evidence that suggests I should reconsider my findings on this matter. Consequently, at the present time I propose to take no further action concerning your proposed introduction of the site adjacent to Potters Bar.

15. I would be grateful if you would assist the Programme officer, in a prompt manner, by submitting any information that would be necessary to enable a thorough examination of the sites that passed the site selection test but were subsequently rejected, together with the rejected sites at Digswell and Oaklands-Mardley Heath referred to above.

Yours sincerely,

M Middleton

Melvyn Middleton

INSPECTOR