

5 April, 2022

Mr. Christopher Dale,
Head of Planning,
Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council.

By email only

Dear Mr Dale,

Welwyn-Hatfield Local Plan Examination

Thank you for your letter of 8 March 2022. In my letter to you of 16 February 2022, I set out the necessary requirements to make this plan sound and the options now before you. Paragraph 17 of that letter asks you to "*please confirm if you intend to provide a sound plan that includes a ten-year supply of identified housing sites and thereby proceed quickly to MMs, by 21 March 2022*". Whilst that letter does ask for an update of the housing trajectory and the finalisation of the Main Modifications (MMs), I should clarify that it did not ask for them by 21 March 2022.

When writing that letter, I was aware that these tasks would take some time to complete and that the further consultation could not begin before the completion of that work and indeed not before the forthcoming local elections. I also understood that it would be inappropriate to begin some of this work until your Council had decided whether or not it wished, in principle, to proceed towards the adoption of a plan with only a ten-year supply of identified housing sites. That was one of the reasons why I asked you to prepare a revised timetable.

I am conscious that the planning issues here are not easy but must stress that after what has been a very long examination, the plan can only move forward now if the Council confirms that it is able to accept the conclusions of the independent examination and carries out a consultation on the recommended MMs. Once that consultation is complete, I will consider all of the comments made at that stage, before reaching my final conclusions, which is normal practice.

I must stress that I am not now asking for the plan to provide a supply of land to meet the requirements of the full twenty-year plan period. I am suggesting that the identification of a supply to meet the requirements for the first ten years post-adoption would be appropriate, including the residual amount that was not achieved between 2016 and 2022. This is consistent with government policy. I estimated that this would mean the identification of land sufficient to accommodate the delivery of around 9,400 dwellings to 2032 but this could change once we see the results of the assessment of 2021-22 housing completions.

Additionally, once the plan is adopted, the Council would be able to review the Borough's housing need and supply and to update the plan accordingly. That could be before the agreed date for a review, if it considered such action to be appropriate. Indeed, as you are no doubt aware, Local Planning Authorities are now expected to review their plans every five years in the context of the government's planning policy of the day and reflecting local circumstances.

It is in everyone's interest to secure the adoption of a sound Local Plan in the immediate future, if that can be achieved. In that context I appreciate your welcoming of the opportunity to consider the option of a housing trajectory, which meets the National Planning Policy Framework requirement for a supply of sites for a ten-year period. I also recognise your desire to have accurate information on which to base the ten-year requirement and understand your wish to monitor the 2021-22 housing completions to assist that outcome.

Additionally, I appreciate the restrictions placed on decision making during the period of sensitivity before the local elections. I look forward to the Council conveying its decision as requested in my letter of 16 February after the local elections.

However, given the extremely long duration of this examination, and to be fair to all with an interest in the plan, I would ask that the Council makes its decision promptly at that point. I am also conscious that any further slippage in the plan's timetable could result in the ten-year post-adoption period being 2023-33 and that that could create further difficulties for you in identifying a ten year-supply of deliverable sites.

In order to move things forward, I would therefore suggest that the date of 21 March 2022, contained in my letter of 16 February 2022 is changed to no later than 8 July 2022. If you could rearrange your Council schedule to achieve an earlier date, that would be appreciated. If your Council chooses to demonstrate a ten-year supply of housing land, then in order to realistically achieve the

adoption of a sound plan that maintains that ten-year period as 2022-32, I think that the MMs consultation should begin as soon as practicable thereafter so that adoption of the plan may be achieved in 2022. In my view, a date beyond July would be likely to result in a 2023 plan adoption date and the then need for the identification of a supply of housing sites until 2033.

The Programme Officer is facing continuous questioning from representors about my response to your letter of 8 March 2022. It is important that all aspects of the Examination are seen to be fair and open and that representors are told what my response to your letter is at an early date. In that context, it would be helpful if this letter could be posted on the examination website promptly, in so far as the legislation governing publicity by local authorities during the period of heightened sensitivity before the elections allows. If that is not possible, I would be grateful if you would let the Programme Officer know and she will arrange for all of the representors to be contacted directly by email.

Your penultimate paragraph discusses a letter that you have received from the Right Honourable Grant Shapps MP and seeks my comments thereon. It is not appropriate for me to respond to that correspondence at this time. I will endeavour to do so as soon after the local elections as I am able to.

Yours Sincerely

M Middleton

Melvyn Middleton

INSPECTOR