

Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council

Note on Birchall Garden Suburb

December 2020

Introduction

In his interim report, the Inspector stated his view that the southern element of Birchall Garden Suburb (policy SP19, SDS2) was not sound due to its impact on the openness of the green belt. He therefore stated that the allocation should be limited to the northern area, and that revisions would need to be made to the local plan to reflect this.

The Council has acknowledged this view in its consideration of the interim report. Therefore the site recommendations provided to you incorporated a reduction in scale at this site.

Site Capacity

The Council has assessed the net area of residential development in the smaller site as 20 hectares excluding land required for the green corridor, stream and wildlife buffers, community hub, green belt boundary strengthening and a 2 form entry primary school. At a conservative net density of 30 dwellings per hectare this would provide a capacity of approximately 600 dwellings. Note that this is 100 dwellings higher than was assumed in the committee reports and in the letter and Appendices sent to you on 30th November 2020.

Green Corridor

The Council considers that the most appropriate route for the green corridor is one which runs across the former landfill site along the northern side of the existing public right of way, then follows the stream for a short while before heading to link with the Commons Local Nature Reserve. An indicative minimum width is indicated although masterplanning work will assess this in more detail. This would continue to provide a substantial green link between various ecological assets, from Howell Park Wood and the other woodlands to the north, linking across to the Commons LNR. Equally it would provide a locally important link across the site for new and existing residents, as well as providing a strategically important section within the wider green corridor proposals. The indicative route is shown on the revised Strategy Diagram (Figure 12) – see Annex 1 to this note.

Facilities and Services

The larger site included a small neighbourhood centre, leisure facilities and a 2 form entry primary school. It is considered highly unlikely that shopping facilities would be viable for an urban extension of 600 homes and therefore it is no longer proposed to incorporate a neighbourhood centre in the Welwyn Hatfield element of the site. Direct footpath links can be provided into the road known as The Commons and thence to local facilities in the existing built up area.

With the loss of the Neighbourhood Centre, a separate location for a community centre is required. It is considered that a location for a community hall which can be combined with café-style refreshments would be suitable next to the green corridor, providing access to a wider customer catchment than just the site itself.

There is still a need for a 2 Form Entry Primary School to be delivered on the site, mainly to educate the new pupils arising on the site itself, but with spare capacity to resolve wider Welwyn Garden City demands. Hertfordshire County Council have confirmed this need in discussions.

Access arrangements

With the removal of the southern element of the site, it is no longer considered appropriate or necessary to provide access direct to the A414. The northern access from Cole Green Lane is retained and becomes the site's main access. Holwell Hyde Lane would not be a highway access but could be an emergency access route, given the scale of the site exceeds 300 dwellings. Appropriate cycle and pedestrian links would be made to the adjoining urban area and along the green corridor further afield. A bus service into the site is considered feasible, using the main access referred to above then following a loop road (to include a bus only route across the green corridor). The strategy diagram indicates these routes indicatively.

Policy Revision

The policy wording for the larger site had been agreed with East Hertfordshire and now forms part of the East Hertfordshire District Plan (policy EWEL1). The site reduction necessitates some relatively minor revisions to the policy and its supporting text. Annex 2 to this note contains a revised version of SP18, the Welwyn Hatfield version of the policy. Note that the policy wording indicates changes compared with the adopted East Hertfordshire policy but the supporting text shows differences with submitted Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan.

Green Belt boundary

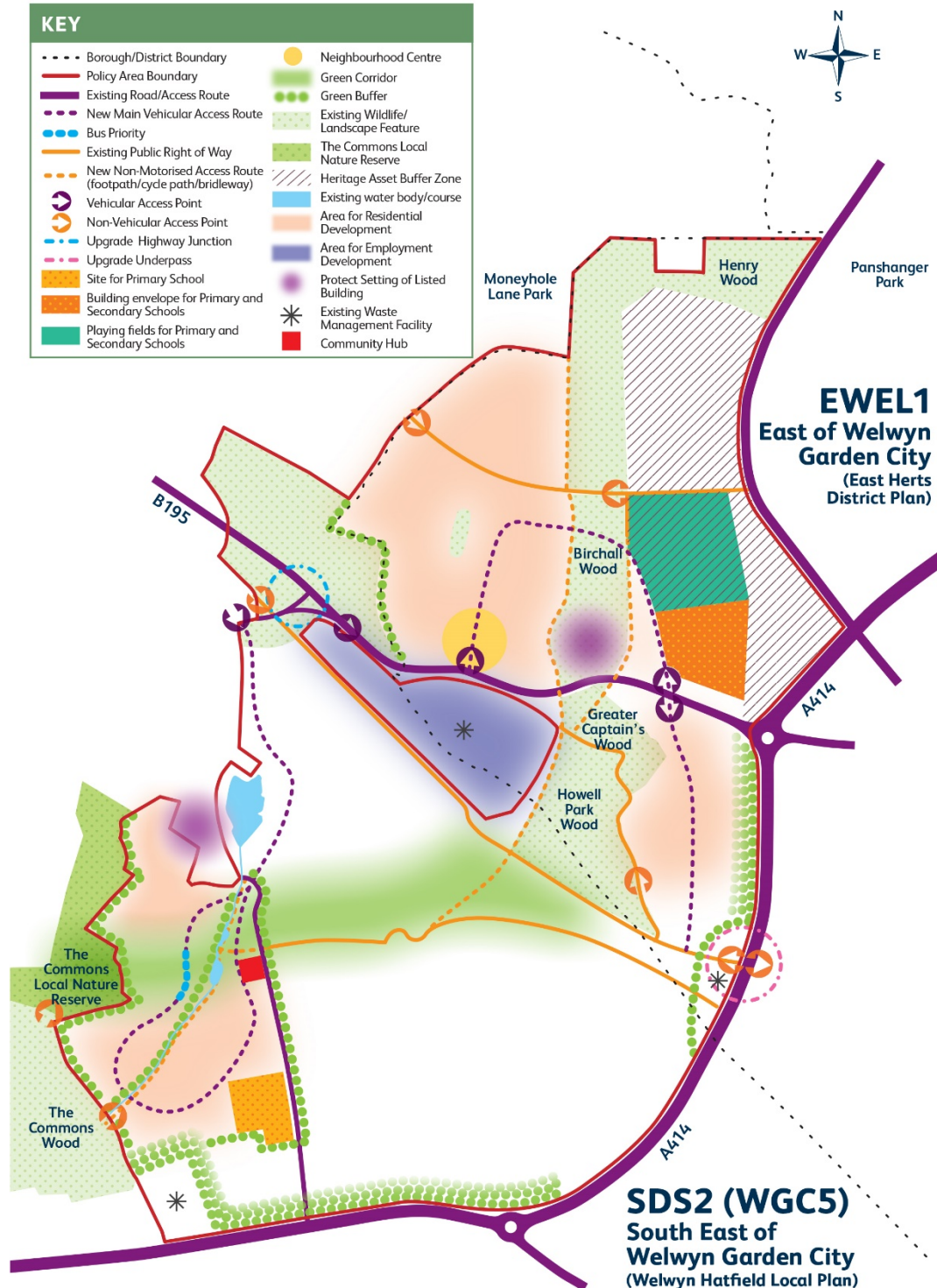
The Council has considered the implications for the green belt boundary of the revised development area. These changes must take account of the adopted East Hertfordshire District Plan which has fixed the extent of the green belt within that district. A plan showing the recommended revised green belt boundary as a red dotted line and the borough boundary in purple is included in Annex 3.

The green belt boundary would follow the edge of the reduced development area and the existing developed area of Burnside. The edge of the LNR and the Commons Wood are strong boundaries on the allocation's western edge. The eastern edge follows another robust boundary along a strong hedgerow and then northwards along the bridleway and the urban edge formed by the dwellings along Thistle Grove. Following Cole Green Lane with its adjoining woodland which is another robust defensible green belt boundary which would then follow the edge of the proposed employment area then the Welwyn Hatfield boundary with East Herts to the A414. This provides for the green belt to include a wedge of land extending into the Welwyn Garden City urban area, in accordance with the views of the Inspector. Moneyhole Lane Park is proposed to be removed from the green belt, since it is now an isolated area of open land with no links to the wider green belt. It should be designated as "Urban Open Land" (SADM17).

Conclusion

The Council considers that the smaller area of Birchall Garden Suburb would be a deliverable urban extension. The main difference in terms of service provision is that there would no longer be a neighbourhood centre, as it is unlikely that this would be viable.

Figure 12 **Birchall Garden Suburb**



Annex 2 Revised Policy and Supporting Text

SP19 South East of Welwyn Garden City – SDS2 (WGC5)

Birchall Garden Suburb

- i. Land at Birchall Garden Suburb is allocated for development in both the Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan (SDS2) and the East Herts District Plan (EWEL1), to accommodate approximately 1,950~~2,550~~ new homes over the plan period, of which 1,200~~600~~ will be in Welwyn Hatfield Borough and 1,350 in East Herts District.
- ii. East Herts District Council and Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council will continue to work together to ensure that the new suburb is delivered in a comprehensive manner across the local authority boundaries. Mechanisms will need to be established to ensure the effective delivery of infrastructure required to support the development.
- iii. A joint masterplan setting out the quantum and distribution of land uses, key views to protect heritage assets, access, sustainable design and layout principles will be prepared by Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council and East Herts District Council, working with the landowner and other key stakeholders. The Masterplan, which will be informed by the Strategy Diagram shown in Figure 12 below, will inform the Supplementary Planning Document which will provide further guidance on site specific matters. The SPD will provide additional detail with regard to design and layout principles (including any design code), the approach to character areas and site density, treatment of ecological and heritage assets, the approach to remediation, access and sustainable transport measures, the location of a Gypsy and Traveller site, phasing and delivery of infrastructure, mineral extraction and built development. Any application for development should be preceded by, and be consistent with, the Masterplan.
- iv. The site will be planned comprehensively to create a new sustainable community incorporating Garden City principles. Land adjacent to the existing edge of Welwyn Garden City will be formal in layout reflecting the character of the Garden City and Garden City principles. Further from the town, lower density development of a more semi-rural character that responds to the locale and landscape will be more appropriate.
- v. The developer must demonstrate the extent of the mineral present and the likelihood of prior extraction in an environmentally acceptable way has been fully considered. As a minimum, an assessment of the depth and quality of mineral, together with an appraisal of the consequential viability for prior extraction without prejudicing the delivery of housing within the plan period should be provided.
- vi. The developer will submit a detailed remediation strategy designed to secure a permanently safe environment for the human population and local wildlife and, following remediation, will submit sufficient evidence to demonstrate that the site is not capable of being determined as

contaminated land under Part IIA of the Environmental Protection Act 1990.

- vii. In accordance with the relevant Local/District Plan policies the site will provide for:
- a. a wide mix of housing types, sizes and tenures, including affordable housing; housing for older people; and serviced plots of land to contribute towards meeting evidenced demand for self-build and custom housebuilding;
 - b. a serviced site for Gypsies and Travellers, which should deliver a total of 15 pitches (4 pitches for East Herts' and 11 pitches for Welwyn Hatfield's needs) to contribute towards the needs of both authorities, the location of which should be determined through the Masterplanning process, taking into account the latest Accommodation Needs evidence of both authorities;
 - c. a neighbourhood centre in the East Herts part of the development ~~and a small neighbourhood centre in the Welwyn Hatfield part of the development, each~~ in an accessible location of a size and scale to meet the day-to-day retail needs of new residents;
 - d. an employment area in a visible and accessible location in accordance with an up-to-date assessment of need; this area would incorporate the Holdings in Welwyn Hatfield, together with land off Birchall Lane (currently allocated as a Waste Site (ref. AS008) in the Hertfordshire Waste Site Allocations Document) subject to there being no adverse impact on neighbouring residential amenity;
 - e. community facilities, including healthcare (in the East Herts part of the development) and social/leisure facilities;
 - f. education facilities, including land for a two form entry primary school with Early Years Provision in Welwyn Hatfield and land in East Herts for a primary school of up to three forms of entry with Early Years Provision and a secondary school of up to eight forms of entry. All schools should provide for the dual use of facilities for community purposes;
 - g. sustainable transport measures that prioritise and encourage walking, cycling and the use of new and existing passenger transport networks. A sustainable transport strategy should support the application, which will set out the location of new routes and improved connections and will detail what measures will be in place to encourage patronage of passenger transport services from the outset of occupation;
 - h. suitable access arrangements and any necessary wider strategic and local highway mitigation measures, including addressing impacts on the A414 in Hertford, the B195 and the A1(M);
 - i. formal and informal open spaces for leisure and recreation, including play areas, sports fields, allotments and community orchards. Spaces will contribute to wider ecological networks including a strategic green infrastructure corridor from St Albans through to Hertford. As such, spaces should:

- be accessible to both new and existing communities;
 - provide north-south and east-west connections, providing upgraded routes for walkers and cyclists, including the Lea Valley Path and Cole Green Way;
 - provide safe routes for wildlife, protecting and enhancing wildlife assets;
 - balance the needs of recreation and nature, providing animal infrastructure and undisturbed areas;
- j. conservation and, where appropriate, enhancement of heritage assets and their settings, including Panshanger Registered Park and Garden, Hatfield House, Hatfield House Registered Park and Garden, Birchall Farm and Holwellhyde Farmhouse, through careful masterplanning and appropriate mitigation measures, having regard to the findings of the Heritage Impact Assessment. A buffer of open land will be required adjacent to Panshanger Park, Birchall Farm and Holwellhyde Farmhouse;
- k. in order to complement wider green corridor and ecological network objectives, the site will protect and enhance areas of ecological importance through a landscape-led green infrastructure strategy. This strategy will create a network of linked habitats across the site which will, provide links to green infrastructure outside the site, facilitate the migration and movement of species, create buffers alongside existing ecological features, provide for recreational access in a way that protects sensitive habitats, and will contribute to achieving net gains to biodiversity across the site. A multifunctional green corridor with a width of about 100m width or greater will be provided to link Howell Park Wood with The Commons Local Nature Reserve. An appropriate land management strategy will also be required;
- l. a landscaped green infrastructure buffer adjacent to the A414 and Burnside will be required to provide visual screening, and to ensure that homes and other land uses are not adversely affected by the impacts of noise and air pollution. The buffer will comprise appropriate design features to provide noise and air quality mitigation, flood attenuation, the creation of new habitats and public rights of way. This buffer will also provide visual screening of development from the A414 and mitigate the harm to heritage assets. Appropriate evidence will be required to inform the design of this buffer;
- m. necessary utilities, including integrated communications infrastructure to facilitate home-working; and
- n. sustainable drainage and provision for flood mitigation.
- viii. In order to ensure that the site is planned and delivered comprehensively, any application for development on part of the site will be assessed against its contribution to the masterplan, and will not prejudice the implementation of the site as a whole.

Justification

14.36 Development site SDS2 forms part of a development proposal for a large scale residential scheme for about ~~2,550~~1,950 dwellings east and south east of Welwyn Garden City, straddling the boundary between Welwyn Hatfield and East Hertfordshire. This Council has been working with East Hertfordshire District Council to ensure that there is a comprehensive and co-ordinated approach to the development of Birchall Garden Suburb. This Council, East Hertfordshire District Council and Hertfordshire County Council (in its capacity as minerals and waste planning authority) will work together with the landowners and other key stakeholders to produce a masterplan for Birchall Garden Suburb which can be adopted jointly as a supplementary planning document.

14.37 The whole of Birchall Garden Suburb will function as an extension to Welwyn Garden City. So the whole of the site needs to have ready access to jobs and facilities in Welwyn Garden City. The East Hertfordshire part of Birchall Garden Suburb also presents the only feasible opportunity to provide a new eight form entry secondary school to serve Welwyn Garden City. SDS2 will need to have vehicular access from Cole Green Lane ~~and the A414 (probably in the vicinity of the Holwell roundabout).~~ Pedestrian and cycle links exist and additional ones can be provided to ensure integration with adjacent parts of Welwyn Garden City, as well as access for early phases of development to the small neighbourhood centre at Hall Grove.

14.38 SDS2 includes a large area of land that was used for mineral extraction and subsequently used for landfill. This land will not be developed for housing, but will be used as a substantial area of parkland. SDS2 also includes land currently in use as a waste facility to the south of Birchall Lane, straddling the boundary between Welwyn Hatfield and East Herts which is allocated in the Hertfordshire Waste Site Allocations Document, July 2014 alongside The Holdings, an area of land previously used for waste operations. These sites are not in the same ownership as most of the rest of Birchall Garden Suburb, but they are quite close to its centre. It is for these reasons that these sites are included within Policy SP 19 as an employment area. Given that some Class B uses, and particularly waste operations, can be noisy and produce dust, it is important that there is appropriate mitigation to protect the proposed housing and that development does not take place within the proposed employment area that is likely to prevent new housing being built or adversely affect the amenities of existing housing.

14.39 It is important to prevent the unnecessary sterilisation of mineral resources (which is a requirement of national policy and the Hertfordshire Minerals Local Plan) whilst ensuring that the site can be developed for housing during the plan period. It is for this reason that the developer is being required to consider, as a minimum, the opportunistic use of some minerals for development within the site needs to have been considered.

Given the presence of designated heritage assets in the vicinity of the development a Heritage Impact Assessment has been prepared. The Panshanger Park and Environs Heritage Impact Assessment July 2016, prepared by Beacon Planning Ltd, considered the potential impact of development at Birchall Garden Suburb on heritage assets including Panshanger Registered Park and Garden,

Hatfield House, Hatfield House Registered Park and Garden, Birchall Farm and Holwellhyde Farmhouse. The assessment made a number of recommendations to help conserve and enhance heritage assets including the need for an appropriate buffer to protect the setting of Panshanger Registered Park and Garden and the retention of open spaces and use of landscaping to mitigate the potential impact on the wider setting of Hatfield House. The masterplanning and subsequent development of the site will take place having regard to the findings of the heritage impact assessment.

14.40 While the whole Birchall Garden Suburb development will be allocated for development in respective Local Plans, in view of its importance and complexity and to enable local communities to help further shape the proposals, there is a need for the subsequent preparation of a masterplan. This will develop the proposals to the next level of detail and will provide a clear platform for the preparation of planning applications. It must be prepared with the full involvement of landowners, local communities and all other interested parties and should comprise:

- A Baseline Summary - to analyse existing information, research and community views in order to identify issues and options, known infrastructure requirements and the need for any further research.
- The Masterplan itself - to take forward the baseline summary and develop the Local Plan policy through to development concept stage. It will illustrate the form and disposition of the development and establish the strategy towards matters such as access, sustainable construction standards, open space and design. It will consider infrastructure requirements in greater detail and any necessary matters of avoiding, mitigating or compensating for environmental impacts. It will be fully informed by the views of the local community and interested parties.
- A Delivery Strategy - to identify how the development will be implemented, the programme, any matters to be resolved such as land assembly and preparation, infrastructure requirements and delivery, development phasing and likely need for development contributions. It will also identify the likely need for public sector intervention, by which agency and when.

14.41 This policy supports the spatial vision and borough-wide objectives 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 9 and 11.

Implementation

14.42 The masterplanned approach to the development of Birchall Garden Suburb will ensure that it functions as a new neighbourhood and sustainable extension to Welwyn Garden City. The policies for the strategic allocation focus on the principles of development and are not intended to provide policy guidance on every aspect. They must therefore be read in conjunction with other general development plan policies in respective Local Plans, including the development management policies in each Local Plan. Any discrepancies between Local Plans will be discussed and resolved through the jointly agreed masterplan. The policy is accompanied by an illustrative diagram which is to be used as a basis for masterplanning and will also help inform decisions on planning applications.

Annex 3 Revised Green Belt Boundary

