

Joint Examination of the Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan 2013-32 (WHLP) and the East Herts District Plan 2011-33 (EHDP)

Birchall Garden Suburb (BGS)/East of Welwyn Garden City (EWEL1)

**Statement by Dr Jonathan Fisher (Freelance Environmental economist)
& Dr Barrie Goldsmith (Ecologist and SUSTRANS Ranger)**

On behalf of the Central Hertfordshire Green Corridor Group:

This statement provides evidence on the following matter raised by the Inspectors:

Matter 2: Green Corridor

It accompanies our statements on the following other matters

Matter 1: Green Belt

Matter 3: Ecology

Matter 5: Other Environmental Considerations

Matter 6: Sustainable location and movement

Matter 10: Waste

Matter 11: Implementation

Matter 2 – Green Corridor

Issue

8) Is the proposal in accordance with the overarching objective of providing a meaningful and coherent Green Corridor?

We welcome and support the Inspectors' statement that Paragraph 114 of the NPPF requires Local Plans to take a strategic approach for the creation, protection, enhancement and management of green infrastructure.

In this context, the Central Herts Green Corridor Group carried out a substantive assessment of the ecosystems services¹ that the Green corridor could deliver. This was in line with latest thinking by Defra and leading academic authorities on this subject. This assessment was designed to answer two fundamental questions that have been raised in our discussions on this subject:

A: "So what? What is the significance of the ecological information?" Therefore we focus on the services and benefits to the community that these assets in the Green Corridor not only currently provide and how this could be enhanced but also how they could be damaged and threatened by prospective developments.

B. "What is the ideal width and length of the green corridor?" We therefore set out the services and benefits that a wider, longer and more coherent corridor can achieve. We benefitted from advice from Professors Susana Mourato and Giles Atkinson - two of the leading environmental economists in Europe who live at the St

¹ see Appendix A: Central Herts Green Corridor Group. (2017) Our Green Corridor: Natural capital and ecosystems services benefits. Report by Drs Jonathan Fisher, Barrie Goldsmith and Peter Oakenfull. Central Herts Green Corridor Group.

Albans end of the Green Corridor. They considered that “*the benefits of the Green Corridor are broadly proportional to its breadth and length – ie double the corridor and you double the benefits*”. Conversely, encroaching significantly on the corridor would correspondingly significantly cut these benefits.

Figure below 1 outlines in green the Green Corridor that we currently propose.



Our assessment shows that the answer to the Inspectors' issue 8 is an emphatic **No** – for the following specific reasons.

1. The Green Corridor could, and must, be more than just the set of narrow paths and recreation facilities as envisaged but poorly spelt out regarding the BGS development.
2. The green corridor should also provide the following ecosystems services which the proposed development at BGS would significantly damage.
 - a. Ecology and Natural habitats (Matter 3). It could damage the open rough grassland on the former landfill site that is currently remote from housing. This open land provides a valuable habitat for the mammals such as voles that are needed to sustain the barn owls and their chicks that successfully breed at the Commons.
 - b. Moreover, this grassland provides insects that provide valuable agri-eco services in terms, for example, of pollination for orchards in the area such as at Tewin.
 - c. Flood risk management (see Matter 5 below).

3. Moreover, the benefits to walkers from an expanded network of paths in the Green Corridor would be considerably greater for walks through richer natural habitats and vistas rather than a narrow sterile path.
4. Furthermore, we share the concerns expressed by the Welwyn Garden City Society and GCE (in the Wardell report) about contamination risks from the former landfill site that covers an extensive area within the central part of this proposed site (**Matter 10**). These concerns and the costs of mitigation measures have not been adequately addressed in the current proposal and Local Plans by either WHBC or EHDC. WHBC's viability assessment by BNP Paris Bas fails to consider such contamination risk issues and allows for just a token estimate for the costs of remediation measures, which bear no relation to the possible contamination risks and their implications for the proposed development. This raises severe doubts about the viability of the proposed development (**Matter 11**) and whether a developer could be found willing to take on these risks and develop the site.
5. Not only would this contravene NPPF requirements in para 173 that "the Local Plan and its proposed developments must be viable and deliverable", it also raises severe doubts about whether the proposed development could actually finance and deliver the promised increased paths and recreation facilities.
6. It is inappropriate and foolhardy to rely on the doubtful promises by this proposed development. Instead a more sustainable and effective method of providing the enhanced network of paths needed would be through the Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) pursuing their proposed plans for this and for the Local Plan to support this by requiring financial contributions for the provision and maintenance of the paths by all the developers and landowners in the Green Corridor. This would be consistent with the proposed path developments that WHBC originally envisaged and considered in their Stage 1 report on the Green Corridor.

To be fair, WHBC did at least early on try to define and promote a Green Corridor between Welwyn and Hatfield. Their policy SP12 says they will "plan positively for the creation, protection, enhancement and management of networks of green infrastructure and link existing spaces for the benefit of wildlife, biodiversity, leisure and recreation". They made an important start in their Stage 1 report on the Green Corridor.

This is significantly more than their neighbouring council - East Herts District Council, who do not even mention or consider a Green Corridor in their Local Plan nor the potentially damaging impacts upon it of this proposed development at BGC/EWEL1 in their Local Plan.

However, WHBC's and EHDC's actual actions in the Local Plan fail to fulfil and put into practice WHBC's good intentions. Moreover, their proposed revisions to the changes in the Green Belt designation and the proposed developments in the Local Plan at Birchall Garden Suburb would actually significantly encroach on the Green Corridor and would significantly damage it and the benefits it currently yield – as highlighted above.

Therefore EHDC and WHBC have not liaised and co-operated on this matter to provide and safeguard a meaningful and coherent Green Corridor.