

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

Supplementary statement by Drs Jonathan Fisher & Barrie Goldsmith, Central Hertfordshire Green Corridor Group: The implications of the proposed development at BGS

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

Matter 3 – Ecology

We welcome and support the Inspector's statement that NPPF paragraph 117 requires that planning for biodiversity should be undertaken at a landscape-scale and across local authority boundaries. It also says that the planning system should minimize impacts on biodiversity and provide net gains in biodiversity where possible.

On these subjects, we endorse the expert comments made by Peter Oakenfull and those by Keith Seaman on behalf of Hertingfordbury Parish Council. We contribute a couple of specific additional important comments regarding the ecosystems services benefits from the ecological assets that could be harmed by the proposed development at BGS.

It is worth noting that the public are generally unaware of the boundary between the two Councils and the birds and mammals certainly ignore it. The main ecological feature is the mosaic of different habitats and most of the highly valued species use more than one of them.

Issues

9) Has an overall holistic survey of the wildlife importance of this area that looked at the interrelationship between the various sites been undertaken, together with risk assessments?

10) If so, has this led to a strategy to minimize the impacts on and achieve net gains to biodiversity within the area during and following the development?

13) Is there a cross boundary biodiversity plan at a landscape-scale that looks at the cumulative impact of the whole development?

The answer to issue 9 is that we do not believe that either council has carried out a full and comprehensive ecological impact assessment neither have they carried out an independent Strategic Ecological Assessment.

The answer to both issues 10 and 13 is No. Moreover, we have important reservations about how net gains to biodiversity is often currently assessed. We believe that any assessment of "net gain" should be in terms of impacts on the ecosystems services benefits that those assets deliver – as set out in our report. It should not just be in terms of impacts on or area of specific biodiversity assets. Moreover, the assessment should not just be in terms of impacts "within the area" but should cover any wider impacts. Thus the proposed development at BGS could harm ecological assets within the area that would have wider impacts in the Green Corridor and region. For example, the arable and common land on the Commons provide winter feeding for important numbers of Reed buntings at Stanborough Reed marsh and also wider outside the county.

Essentially the impacts on the whole of these benefits and services is much greater than its individual parts taken separately. Therefore the Green Corridor needs to be viewed as an integrated system and considered strategically. For the Local Plan to be sound, the Council need to set out a strategic assessment of the environmental assets in the Green Corridor and their wide ranging ecosystems services and benefits. WHBC and EHDC have failed to do this.

11) In the context of the area's wildlife, is the Sustainability Appraisal sufficiently robust to act as a justifiable basis for an overall assessment of this development proposal?

No, WHBC and EHDC's Sustainability Appraisals are both inadequate and have significant limitations that mean they do not comply with legal requirements and do not measure up adequately to NPPF requirements. Their conclusions and assessments are based on little or no supporting evidence. They are largely based on the hidden subjective views of the consultants.

They just focus largely on implications of the Local Plans' Policies, which are full of good intentions and often say the right things; however, their proposed developments in the plans regarding BGS run counter to these intentions. Thus with respect to Policy SP11 'Protection and Enhancement of Critical Environmental Assets', WHBC's Sustainability Appraisal (p 95) states that its effects are 'mainly positive or significantly positive'. However, the sustainability appraisals then fail to assess adequately the impacts of specific proposed developments at BGS. We concur with concerns raised by Peter Oakenfull and Hertingfordbury Parish Council (Keith Seaman)'s statement that the proposed development would have significant adverse ecological impacts on the site and in the wider Green Corridor. Moreover, this proposed development would present significant risks and issues regarding water pollution and flood risks, which the development and the Sustainability Appraisals fail to assess and address (see our statement on matter 5).

Moreover, the Sustainability Appraisals of BGS fails to assess the joint and cumulative impacts of not only the component of the site within Welwyn Hatfield Borough but also that falling within East Herts. Such impacts should be considered together **before** any decision can be made on this site.

15) Has sufficient attention been paid to the protection and enhancement of wildlife sites and their inter-linkages.

These are difficult to measure but no, we do not believe that any work of this kind has been carried out. Peter Oakenfull in his submission gives an exemplary account of the subject. In summary, the area has a fen with a complete pollen profile, Ancient Woodland, a Local Nature Reserve (The Commons), one Country Park which is Heritage England grade two-star (Panshanger Park). Maybe the whole area should be a Regional Reserve but unfortunately that is not an official designation? Let us just settle for it being an outstanding, diverse and biologically-rich Green Corridor that is also supplying some important Ecosystem Services.