

Submission from Welwyn Garden City Society to the Inspector's hearing regarding Stage 3 of the draft local plan submitted by Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council (WHBC).

Examination of the Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan 2013-32

The comments that follow are in response to the numbered questions set out in the Inspector's Preliminary Questions.

23. Does the Policy controlling advertisements appropriately reflect the historic context of Welwyn Garden City?

No; the policies for both shopfront and advertisement design are set out in leaflet which is headed "Guide to shopfront and advertisement design". Whilst the context of the town are set in the leaflet as being a planned town from the outset and one of only two towns planned as a "garden city" and therefore an important location, the leaflet being a Guide suggests that it is "voluntary". Further, the section on "Advertisements" is marked as "Good Practice". This reinforces it being voluntary only.

Time and time again the Society has to remind WHBC that the place is different. This means that the peculiarities of the place need to be respected as otherwise it simply becomes a "clone town" - one like any other. The council is not known for safeguarding its distinctiveness and, where it does, it does so with little enthusiasm or budget. Where possible the Council relies on whatever it can to avoid action or expense. For example, the council relies on the following to minimise action it might have to take on the Estate Management scheme:

"The Council does not have a roving jurisdiction to inquire about potential breaches – the scheme envisages that the Council will consider breaches which it receives notice of from those who occupy the Estate and after consideration decide what action, if any, to take".

"Accordingly without a formal complaint from any lessee or owner of any part of the Estate, it is not open to Officers to open up further cases, even if resources were to permit such a course of action".

So, similarly, its leaflet on shop front design and advertisement design is enforced with "persuasion". This is laudable no doubt and it may work with local business which more readily sees what is being said and which can be subjected to local pressure from groups such as ourselves. However, this approach is not understood by large corporates who might wish to come into the town. Sooner or later one of these will dig their heels in and resist the requests of WHBC that does not have the funds or desire to defend the place.

In addition, many advertisements are hung up on railings separating pavements and pedestrians from cars. Sometimes, this is a responsibility of County authorities and

sometimes it is the responsibility of the borough council. However, proactive effort from WHBC would be better to discourage such activity.

58. Should development within Welwyn Garden City be required to reflect the symmetry, balance and streetscape of the existing built development?

Yes. This is essential where extensions to existing properties are involved. Where new developments are concerned, it should also be the practice as this is one of the features of the place and which gives it local distinctiveness.

101. Is it sufficiently clear as to what controls are to be put in place to regulate development in order to preserve and enhance the character and appearance of Welwyn Garden City, which is an internationally recognized site?

No; we have only this year been promised a "Design Guide" setting out the detail of the standards to be applied in the Estate Management Scheme areas. This is after years of pressing for such a guide. Too often, planners rely on standards that relate to the wider world but these do not conform to the town's original concept of symmetry, balance and their impact on the streetscape. This results in some new developments being simply routine "post modernist" rather than being revised iterations of the idiom in which the town is largely built. Some recent developments in town could come from any large builder's national catalogue.

102. Why is there no reference to locally listed buildings?

WHBC has still failed to fully address the recommendations made in the Conservation Area Appraisal of September 2007 – the answer is a lack of will.

103. How are locally listed buildings to be assessed?

Listed buildings and all buildings in Conservation Areas (including the Town Centre) need to be properly recorded, their key features understood so that they are properly valued as to making the place different from its neighbours. This need to be "different" or USP is an essential requirement for the town going forward if it is to retain its distinct appeal as a centre.

104. Without a mechanism requiring sites with the potential to contain heritage assets to be adequately assessed, how can the policy be fully effective at conserving the historic environment?

Good question! We are at a loss to understand it ourselves.

43. Should nationally derived dwelling space standards be included in the policy?

Not if they are unreasonable. We have some recent apartment buildings that are so short of storage space that owners need to store much of their possessions in a new storage facility set up in town. This is absurd.

51. Should the supply of land available for industrial, office and warehousing uses be protected from changes of use to other purposes in all employment areas?

Yes – in so far as this relates to Welwyn Garden City; the lack of industrial space has pushed up rentals and valuations to small industrial units very significantly and this in turn will lead to further encroachment upon employment areas as they are sold up and turned into flats – often without adequate parking.

56. Should the policy include a clause that requires proposed taller buildings to be assessed in the context of their impact on the area's heritage assets?

Yes! If the setting of Hatfield House is important, so the setting of the town and its town centre needs to be enhanced wherever possible rather than damaged by inappropriate taller buildings or by developments that have no kinship with the place (eg, Birchall Garden Suburb)

In the Broadwater Road West development in Welwyn Garden City, it is felt that taller buildings can be accommodated because they are close to long standing "silos" but their design in conjunction with the existing needs to be handled sympathetically.

57. Should specific design visions be promoted for each of the large new neighbourhoods proposed in the plan?

Yes!

Will Davis
Chairman
Welwyn Garden City Society

25/1/2017