

Examination of the Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan

Hearing Stage 4 - Site SS1

Comments on the Inspector's Preliminary Questions

As residents of over 30 years living in the adjacent road to the former Panshanger Airfield we have taken an interest in the proposed housing development on this site since 2009. In the intervening years many of the local residents who are actually aware of the proposals for the site have expressed opposition to it but have now become disillusioned because they feel their opinions have been repeatedly dismissed. We have a number of concerns about the proposal for inclusion of the site in the Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan as follows.

1. Question 23. Consultation. Para 155 of the NPPF states: *"A wide section of the community should be proactively engaged, so that Local Plans, as far as possible, reflect a collective vision and a set of agreed priorities for the sustainable development of the area"*.

Along with many other local residents we feel meaningful consultation by the Council with the local community has not taken place. Although the Council has held exhibitions these have not been well advertised and some have been held in difficult to find locations with restricted viewing hours. There has been no direct explanatory communication with all local residents affected by the plan and many are still unaware of the proposals. A larger scale, 'town-hall style' exhibition would have brought the plan to public attention, as would letters sent to the individual households most affected by the plan. Only those already registered with an interest in local planning received direct notification of the proposal to include the site in the local plan.

From the start of planning there has been a bias shown towards future housing developments being focussed on the north of the borough, resulting in an uneven distribution of potential sites across the whole of the borough. At local council meetings decisions have been taken to safeguard individual councillor's interests rather than those of the community as a whole. In particular spoken and written promises by local Panshanger councillors have been broken. The councillors failed to represent Panshanger residents' opinion at council meetings, so the local voice was unheard. The end result is that the majority of new housing is proposed in the north of the borough rather than spread more evenly.

In an early Council meeting about the future housing proposals the minutes state:

"The arguments in favour of one option over the other were finely balanced. Although option 6 which identified growth around the large villages, was arguably the more sustainable option, there had been substantial objection from the local community to such growth. The Panel took residents views into account and whilst both options required a similar amount of development around the towns, it was considered that to recommend option 6 in the face of the large amount of objection would have been perverse."

During the ensuing planning process the views of a very large number of Panshanger residents, put forward individually and by the residents' group Panshanger People, appear however to have been 'perversely' disregarded.

Local planning is difficult for the layman to understand and communities need to be provided with clear, explanatory information to be able to participate, as required by Section 112 of the Localism Act 2011. We do not accept that the Council has undertaken early and meaningful collaboration with the local community.

2. Question 32. Traveller Camps. The new camps proposed in the local plan have also been located predominantly in the north of the borough. The Council has failed to consult adequately with traveller groups and therefore the distribution of camps is based on assumption rather than evidence. However,

more general research suggests travellers do not want to live near large housing estates. Mariposa's own surveys suggest that most local Panshanger residents are opposed to such a development, largely due to past experience when travellers camped illegally on the airfield. There has however been no direct consultation by the Council with local residents about this proposed camp. In any event recent changes by the Government regarding the definition of gypsies and travellers would seem to suggest that fewer traveller camps will be needed in the future. The Council appears to have failed to conduct recent meaningful consultation on this matter.

3. Questions 29 and 33. Infrastructure. There is widespread concern amongst Panshanger residents about the immense strain the proposed development will place on local services. Parking is an issue, particularly at the Moors Walk car park serving the shops, doctors' and dentist surgeries and the pharmacy. The car park is frequently full and cars are already being displaced to park on the busy road, making it dangerous for all road users and pedestrians. The doctors' surgery is overloaded and operates on a telephone triage system (a system described recently in the national press as one adopted as an emergency measure when a surgery is unable to cope with demand) and patients have had to travel to Stevenage for hospital treatment since the QEII hospital in Welwyn Garden City was closed. The Lister is failing to cope with the increase in referrals. No proposals have been submitted to mitigate these problems.

Local schools are already oversubscribed. For economic reasons schools on new developments are usually built at the end of the process, once the majority of the houses are occupied. This results in children who are already resident in the area having to travel further afield to school in the meantime when new residents move in closer to the school, displacing those who live further away but still within the catchment area.

There is also concern about the large volume of traffic which will be caused by cars used by the 1640 residents Mariposa suggest will reside on the site. Together with the cars from the nearby East Herts development these vehicles will put pressure on traffic flow and increase pollution on local roads and those into the town centre. Again no proposals have been made to mitigate this problem.

4. Questions 24, 25, 27 and 28. Loss of Amenity and Threat to the Mimram Valley. Many residents use the area for leisure activities (walking, dog walking etc.) and it is also a haven for wildlife, including skylarks, barn owls and red kites. We are not aware that the Council has done a comprehensive wildlife survey yet we understand that some of these animals could be endangered species.

The development of the site also threatens the Mimram Valley, an area of natural beauty and of special scientific interest because of its rare chalk stream. Development of the site could potentially cause excessive water run-off causing flooding in the valley. Local opinion suggests this may already have been the case when the valley flooded in recent years following the building of the existing housing estate. More houses would increase this risk. Houses on the perimeter of the site will have a detrimental visual impact on the valley, altering the rural nature of an area which should be protected for future generations and for biodiversity. If the Green Belt were to be altered and more houses built on the site, this threat would be greatly increased.

A report to the House of Commons in December 2014 states: *"The NPPF provisions on the natural environment have an important role to play in ensuring sustainable development is delivered. Local authorities are missing an opportunity if they do not set out a clear vision for the biodiversity of their area."*

One would hope this would be considered particularly important in a Garden City.

The NPPF also states in sections 73 and 74:

"73. Access to high quality open spaces and opportunities for sport and recreation can make an

important contribution to the health and well-being of communities. Planning policies should be based on robust and up-to-date assessments of the needs for open space, sports and recreation facilities and opportunities for new provision.

74. Existing open space, sports and recreational buildings and land, including playing fields, should not be built on unless:

- *an assessment has been undertaken which has clearly shown the open space, buildings or land to be surplus to requirements; or*
- *the loss resulting from the proposed development would be replaced by equivalent or better provision in terms of quantity and quality in a suitable location; or*
- *the development is for alternative sports and recreational provision, the needs for which clearly outweigh the loss.*

5. Question 34. Gravel Extraction. We walk regularly in the area and in Panshanger Park so are acutely aware of the noise, dust and intrusion into the environment caused by gravel extraction, and along with many other local residents, are strongly opposed to gravel extraction. It would be totally unreasonable to expect residents to tolerate such activity so near their homes.

We are fully aware of the need for more housing but feel the Council should also be aware of its duty of care to existing residents, as required by the NPPF. Concentrating so much new housing in the north of the borough and, in the case of Site SS1, so near the large proposed development by East Herts, will put excessive strain on the local area, its services and infrastructure. For these reasons we believe that the inclusion of Site SS1 in the Local Plan is unsound.