

Statement Regarding the Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan Examination on the National Policy requirements related to site SDS1/WGC4.

This statement summarises information already submitted to, or known by the council, but in addition submits a newly released document which strengthens the effect of the national policy.

Note: the SDS1/WGC4 site is still an airfield in planning terms and it was only the withdrawal of the lease from the land owners to the airfield operator that means the airfield is not operational at this time.

Summary of existing information already commented on in previous consultations :

In the NPPF, there are various paragraphs that relate to planning for airfields and for airports which are relevant and paraphrased below and were contained in my submission to the consultation in 2016:

NPPF paragraph 33 refers to planning for airports and that plans should take account of their growth and role in serving business, training, leisure and emergency services.

NPPF paragraph 28 states that policies should promote the retention and development of local services, community facilities and sports venues.

NPPF paragraph 74 states that sporting venues should not be built on unless they are surplus to requirement, could be replaced by other provision or the development is for other sport or recreation which outweighs their loss (none of these is true in this case).

NPPF paragraph 70 says planning policies should plan positively for community facilities, guard against the loss of valued facilities and services and ensure that established facilities are able to develop and be retained for the community. Policies should also ensure an integrated approach to considering the location of housing, economic uses and community services.

Aviation Framework Policy section 6.6 states that local planning authorities should identify and protect sites and routes which could be critical in identifying infrastructure to widen choice, which applies to airport infrastructure.

In 2015, the Government (Dept of Transport) produced a report on the General Aviation (GA) industry in this country and a General Aviation Strategy. It was recognised that GA contributes £3bn to the UK economy, but that it is in danger of decline. A major factor leading to this decline is the loss of airfields. The GA industry relies on a network of airfields of varying size and function throughout the country, but this network is in danger of being decimated by current planning pressures, especially in the SE of the UK. Without this network of airfields, training demand cannot be met and the pilots this country needs for its commercial and military aviation will not experience the introduction to flying that will inspire them.

This report led to a specific piece of planning guidance from the DfT (enclosed) stating in summary, that Local planning authorities should have regard to the extent to which an aerodrome contributes to connectivity outside the authorities own boundaries, working together with other authorities and LEP s as required by the NPPF. Local planning authorities should also have regard to the Aviation Policy Framework to allow aviation to continue making a significant contribution. **It also says that a working or former aerodrome could be put forward for consideration as a site for mixed use development that includes continuing, adapting or restoring aviation services in addition to other uses.**

The General Aviation Awareness Council (GAAC) as the body representing general aviation in planning issues, also released guidance on planning in relation to aerodromes for local planning authorities, aerodrome owners and aerodrome operators which was sent to every planning authority in the country (Copy enclosed).

New Information:

Since 2015, work has continued on the issue of retaining a network of airfields needed to support the GA industry. The GAAC was tasked by the General and Business Aviation strategy Forum (GBASF) (which was created to monitor and progress the 2015 GA Aviation strategy) to prepare a paper for the Aviation Minister, Lord Callanan, on how to identify a network of Airfields of strategic importance to General Aviation, which would be brought to the attention of the relevant authorities.

I enclose this new piece of work has only just been completed and submitted to Lord Callanan, so was not in my previous submission.

This paper calls for legislative protection, similar to that for Railway stations to create stability and the commercial certainty for the industry to thrive. It states that the current network of airfields should be considered the minimum to maintain the industry at its current level and that there is concern that the expected increase over the coming 5/10 years may not be catered for. The GAAC calls for government action to ensure the necessary legislative steps, particularly in town planning, are taken to protect GA airfields now for the benefit of this and future generations.

The report also points out the role of STEM training in GA which could be lost. This is particularly relevant to Panshanger which had a strong link with the aeronautical engineering dept. at the University of Hertfordshire.

This threat to GA airfields is a growing problem, with 10 certified airfields lost in the last few years and 24 more currently under threat in the country (out of a total of 144). It is particularly acute in the South-East. In the area North of London which serves both local pilots and those travelling out from London (where airspace restrictions prohibit GA airfields operating), the potential loss or restrictions at Panshanger, Andrewsfield (Essex), Bourn (Cambridgeshire), Earls Colne (Essex) and Wycombe (Buckinghamshire) would leave too few licensed airfields able to train pilots in this region. I know from experience that Elstree (Hertfordshire) is already over capacity and their pilot training is already affected.

Has Welwyn Hatfield Council complied with these National Planning Rules?

The council has continued to promote the site for housing throughout the plan progression, but did, in the draft plan submission, add the following statements:

“In addition, the Masterplan will allow the opportunity for a realigned grass runway on land to the north of the Green Belt boundary.”

“On balance, the Council consider that the need for housing is of greater importance than the need to retain a former airfield facility...so it is appropriate that the site be released for development now. However, development at the site will be configured in such a way that the opportunity remains for the relocation of the grass runway to be provided on Green Belt land to the north of SDS1 [Panshanger development site]”

“A structural landscaping area is required to the north of the site to mitigate its impact on heritage assets and views across the Mimram valley”

However, the council did not consult aviation experts or request a ground survey and in consequence the greenbelt site is not wide enough to comply with the minimal dimensions specified in CAA regulations for a licenced airfield. These statements also do not guarantee that any necessary buildings will receive planning permission and that the landscaping will be configured so as not be a safety hazard to airfield operations.

Proposed Change to the Local Plan

To be properly compliant with national policy, we would like the council to create a separate policy which positively plans for a reinstated airfield and ancillary buildings as part of a mixed development on the site. This policy should allocate sufficient land for the airfield and should configure the housing development accordingly.