



HOUSE OF COMMONS

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Oral Statement by Grant Shapps MP to Public Examination into the Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan 20th February 2018

I am Grant Shapps, the Member of Parliament for Welwyn Hatfield. I am here to make a statement as the local MP. I also declare an interest as Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on General Aviation – comprising 132 cross-party MPs and Peers – and as a past Panshanger aviator, giving me direct knowledge of the airfield, its position and support in our community.

Also relevant to today: As a Housing, Planning and Local Government Minister in the Coalition, I helped author the National Planning Policy Framework. And, later I handled General Aviation as Cabinet Minister without Portfolio.

I recognise it is important that the need for housing is not only recognised but met by the Local Plan. I fully support this.

I also endorse the need for this Local Plan to be robust and sound. It is for you, Sir, to guide the Local Authority as to whether the permanent loss of Panshanger Airfield is contrary to policy.

Turning to your question 25, I believe that Panshanger Airfield is an important local, regional and national asset, capable of remaining a prized community, business, leisure and tourism resource. A position supported by Sport England, the University of Hertfordshire, the Welwyn Hatfield Chamber of Commerce and the vast majority of constituents I represent.

Moreover, I believe that contrary to other claims you are hearing today, its continued use as an airfield is not only supported by the NPPF, but is further enhanced by related planning guidance documents.

The question you ask in terms of soundness, is: “whether the permanent loss of Panshanger airfield is contrary to national policy” and therefore “*whether this proposed policy [SP 18] is in accordance with Government policy?*”

Can the Masterplan “*allow the opportunity for a realigned grass runway on land to the north of the Green Belt boundary?*” or does it in fact do precisely the opposite to that which the policy claims – by effectively “disallowing a realigned runway”, through lack of space.

Both the land within the Green Belt and the Area of Special Restraint (ASR) comprising the airfield (which includes land proposed for housing at Panshanger and a narrow area to its north) has a lawful use as an airfield and has been in such use since WWII.

The Local Plan proposal is for housing to be built on the Area of Special Restraint, with an opportunity for the airfield to be moved to the northern green belt.

Since paragraph 81 of the NPPF urges Local Authorities to plan positively to enhance the beneficial use of Green Belt, such as looking for opportunities to provide for outdoor sport and recreation, I can therefore see no objection to the airfield moving – in part – to the northern green belt.

However, the problem with SADM 7 (New & Existing Community Services & Facilities) and SP18, relates to there being insufficient room to deliver the council's own masterplan on the green belt alone. A point I will return to.

Throughout the development of this Local Plan process, Mariposa has sought to present Panshanger Airfield as a "private club" requiring membership. Putting aside the fact that it was their own lease which imposed these restrictions, their description is in any case seriously misleading when it comes to General Aviation.

Indeed, nearly all UK airfields are private businesses. But that's perhaps no more relevant than pointing out that most of the homes - of the type they propose to build – would be privately owned.

The reality is that, as my constituents will tell you, there was nothing exclusive at all about Panshanger airfield serving this community. Indeed, there were over 12,000 mainly local members and many thousand more constituents enjoyed regular community events and activities at Panshanger. It is therefore wrong and unreasonable to argue that Paragraphs 70 and 74 of the NPPF, relating to the promotion of social, recreational and cultural facilities (our area has a long aviation heritage after all), as well as the provision of shared space and community facilities, would not be subject to unnecessary loss of valued facilities and services.

Indeed, this facility enjoys not only community, but also institutional support. The University of Hertfordshire has in excess of 500 students studying aerospace subjects. And the Vice-Chancellor recently told me, *"The University of Hertfordshire would welcome the reinstatement of Panshanger airfield as part of a mixed-use approach. Given the impressive aviation history in this area, and the University's continued status as a leading aeronautical education institution, there could be potential benefits and opportunities for our students and the wider population."*

And contrary to paragraph J in the Council's Statement today, I have a letter from a member of the Innovation Board of the LEP who confirms *"that the LEP has always been interested in the project and continues to be so,"* he continues, *"For the council to suggest there is no interest is simply untrue."*

Other business organisations, including the Welwyn Hatfield Chamber of Commerce also strongly support the reinstatement of the airfield.

I was surprised to read in today's Mariposa/HCA Hearing Statement (paragraph 2.8) that they believe that *"there are no specific policies or guidance in the NPPF that refer to General Aviation airfields."*

This is absolutely untrue. Indeed, as the Council themselves recognise in paragraph G of their Statement, NPPF paragraph 33 addresses airfields.

This reference is further supported by government policy in the Aviation Policy Framework (APF)¹ which remains current and with full force, and then most specifically in Transport Planning Guidance.

¹ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/153776/aviation-policy-framework.pdf

Moreover, a recent Parliamentary Answer in Hansard reveals that this Framework has been still *further* strengthened by the March 2015 publication of the General Aviation Strategy:

Aviation: Written question - 117145

Q

Asked by [Grant Shapps](#)
(Welwyn Hatfield)

[\[N\]](#)

Asked on: 04 December 2017

Department for Communities and Local Government

Aviation

117145

To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, with reference to the General Aviation Strategy, what assessment his Department has made of how current planning guidance supports the Government's vision of the UK being the best place in the world for General Aviation.

A

Answered by: [Alok Sharma](#)

Answered on: 07 December 2017

The National Planning Policy Framework expects local planning authorities, when preparing their Local Plans, to take account of the role of airfields in meeting business, leisure, training and emergency service needs.

The planning practice guidance supporting the Framework was strengthened in March 2015, following publication of the General Aviation Strategy², to make clear that aviation makes a significant contribution to economic growth across the country, including in relation to small and medium sized airports and airfields.

The guidance advises that local planning authorities should consider the interconnectivity between airfields of different sizes and that they should have regard to the Aviation Policy Framework.

I would draw your attention to the Aviation Policy Framework (APF), including paras 5.6 and 1.86-1.91³ which support small airfields such as Panshanger remaining in aviation use and encourages mixed-use developments.

Indeed, this gets to the nub of the issue. Mariposa claim that, even if they are wrong and lose the relevant NPPF arguments that you have queried, relating to paragraphs 28, 70 and 74, then this is in any case, *"significantly outweighed by the benefits of releasing the land for housing"*.

Yet the whole point of government policy in this area is to encourage mixed-use development with regard to small airfields like Panshanger. So, a black and white housing or retain aviation decision is not what is required here. Rather, a decision to provide a mixed-use housing/aviation development – as per government policy and as per SP18.

However, as the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) has confirmed, it is not practicable to relocate the entire airfield to the north of the proposed housing area, exclusively within the narrow band of Green Belt (shown on Figure 11 in the draft Local Plan).

I understand the airfield is a 'community facility' in the context of Policy SADM 7 and if it is not to be lost forever, some of the facility will need to remain on the current Area of Special Restraint (ASR). I

²

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/417334/General_Aviation_Strategy.pdf

³ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/153776/aviation-policy-framework.pdf

understand that the area to the north of the airfield⁴ is in separate ownership and would be outside the proposed Masterplan area in any event.

In addition to impediments to relocation including land acquisition from a third-party, the need for engineering works including earth moving, the felling of trees, bushes and woodland, and the matter of obtaining planning permission for the formation and use of such a relocated or 'new' runway, the cost would also be substantial. Indeed paragraph N of the Council's statement admits the current plan does not allow for a CAA licenced runway. Even as SP18 apparently allows for exactly that.

I am also aware, others will address Civil Aviation Authority requirements in greater detail, of the need for safety margins on either side of any runway, which require land to be clear of obstructions above a certain height. All these matters must be taken into account and I am not aware that either the Council or developer has consulted either the CAA or other certified specialist aviation practitioners (such as York Aviation) to ascertain whether the policy, as currently stated, is sound. If no such aviation expertise has been employed, you may regard this as surprising.

Therefore, if relocation as currently envisaged by the Local Plan is not practicable, the Masterplan for the development does not, to use the words of the Policy "*allow the opportunity for a realigned grass runway on land to the north of the Green Belt boundary*". The policy is, I suggest, doing the very opposite – it is in fact denying that opportunity.

In order to create the opportunity for a mixed-use development, as envisioned by both the Local Plan and guidance including '*Transport evidence bases in plan making*', paragraph: 012 Reference ID: 54-012-20150313, Revision date: 13 03 2015⁵, it is necessary to "pull back" the pink area of housing development land on Policy SP 18 and Figure 11 to adjust the Masterplan for site SDS1⁶. This will enable both housing and aviation uses to be accommodated. I am very much in favour of that compromise situation because, as I understand it, this policy [SP 18] would be unsound otherwise. It would be contrary to policy SADM 7 if this facility is not retained. That is a matter for you of course.

Sir, I must point out that in seeking to minimise the economic impact of the loss of this facility, the Council's statement wrongly claims that "*the former aerodrome operator has relocated its operations elsewhere in the region*". This is untrue. The operator has not moved their operation somewhere else.

Both Mariposa (Hearing Statement paragraph 2.24) and the Council (Hearing Statement paragraph K) wrongly suggest that there is no evidence that Panshanger Aerodrome is needed, either in a local or regional context. This is completely untrue. As Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on General Aviation, I can confirm the only remaining licensed airfield in Hertfordshire (Elstree) is well-beyond capacity with flight training severely restricted, no ground space available and there is a national shortage of General Aviation airfields. Indeed, the Department for Transport is currently establishing a strategic network of airfields – of which Panshanger is included.

Mariposa claim that the number of Pilot Licences being obtained remains static (paragraph 2.24), yet Boeing (who have a significant global presence in Welwyn Garden City) project 630,000 pilots will need training by 2032. Panshanger is therefore a huge economic opportunity for our Borough.

Mariposa (paragraph 2.27) point out that NPPF paragraph 173 states that Local Plans should be deliverable and suggest that no viable plan for the airfield has been presented.

⁴ beyond (to the north of) the red Site Boundary line on Figure 11 of the Draft Local Plan

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/transport-evidence-bases-in-plan-making-and-decision-taking>

⁶

http://consult.welhat.gov.uk/portal/planning_policy/local_plan_proposed_submission_august_2016/lpps_document?pointId=s1467890356156

However, the evidence is against them. Not only was there a viable & profitable aviation business on the same site previously, but Mariposa's own advisor's Gardner & Theobald concluded that such an operation would be profitable in the future. A number of serious parties have come forward with business plans, but Mariposa have largely refused to engage (sending letters which closed off discussion). Either way, I note there is an outline Planning Application in front of the council as we speak, which directly contradicts the Council's paragraph L claiming that they are not currently aware of a replacement proposal. It is no more correct to claim that an airfield is unviable, than it is to claim that housing is unprofitable.

The Council's Statement says the LEP had previously suggested Panshanger would need upgrading to provide business flights. I am happy to report that this is now inaccurate. As of 2018, a Europe-wide change means that an aerodrome like Panshanger can immediately be used for commercial air-taxi services to the UK and Europe. These are the Single Engine Turbo Prop changes, and as an expert witness on GA, I can confirm no upgrade would be required to operate such services. This renders out of date the information provided to the council by the LEP, opens strategic travel for Welwyn Hatfield's businesses, and supports paragraph 28 of the NPPF with regard to supporting a prosperous rural economy.

Finally, it is my understanding that nearly every single one of the bullet points in paragraphs 28, 33, 70 and 74 of the NPPF⁷, the Aviation Policy Framework⁸ sections 5.6 and 1.86-1.91 and planning guidance on transport evidence bases⁹, which you have copies of, are contrary to the loss of Panshanger Aerodrome as an aviation facility. If Policy SP 18 (Figure 11) as currently drawn, does not in practical terms "*allow the opportunity for realignment*" of a runway at Panshanger airfield, then it must be, by definition, unsound.

⁷ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/6077/2116950.pdf

⁸ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/153776/aviation-policy-framework.pdf

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/transport-evidence-bases-in-plan-making-and-decision-taking>