

# Welwyn/Hatfield Local Plan Examination

## Stage 8 Virtual Hearings

### Inspector's note for participants

#### Introduction

We were unable to hold these hearings in May at Welwyn/Hatfield Council Chamber, in accordance with the Examination Programme, because of the Covid 19 lockdown. They were provisionally postponed until late July/early August. I have now been advised that the Council Chamber is unlikely to be available for such events in the near future. Nevertheless, the Council has the technology to allow the hearings to proceed virtually and I have therefore decided to proceed on this basis, using ZOOM Client for Meetings. Assuming that we can complete all of the procedural and technical arrangements then I propose to begin the Stage 8 Hearing sessions on Tuesday 28 July. A provisional timetable is attached.

Some people will be more familiar with this technology than others, and we will have to adapt, make allowances and learn from the experience as we go along. However, I want to emphasise that as previously, all of our hearings will be conducted in a fair, open and impartial manner. If you are to participate in any of the virtual Hearings then please read this note very carefully, as it sets out the procedures and rules for how these hearings will be conducted. If everyone fully understands the protocol and technical considerations, then we are more likely to have virtual hearings without mishaps. You should also read or re-read the Pre-Hearing note (amended copy attached) about the format and content of Examination Hearings in general and site allocations in particular.

#### Joining the hearing as a participant

Participants should join their session using the electronic link in their invitation. Please note that if you are participating in more than one Hearing session then you will receive a separate invitation for each session. Participants without access to the internet can dial-in to the virtual hearing by telephone. The telephone number will be provided within the invitation. Further guidance is provided on this in the accompanying notes "Using Zoom on a Laptop or iPad"

#### Watching a hearing

As before, the sessions will be available for non-participants and the public to watch live on the internet. A link will be available on the front page of the Welwyn/Hatfield Local Plan examination webpage (<https://www.welhat.gov.uk/localplanexamination>) This enables people to watch the hearings as they would with a physical hearing, either in real time or later. Only one participant will be allowed for each representor who has asked to be represented at these Hearings and there will be no substitution within the sessions. However, the live streaming will allow those in the same organisation

or team, as their participating colleague, to keep up with the proceedings in real time.

## The hearing format

My aim is to make the virtual hearings as similar as possible to physical hearings in the way that they are run and the way that you participate. Please bear in mind that the purpose of the hearings is for me to gain the information that I need to examine the plan's soundness.

At the start of each hearing session I will check appearances. I will lead the hearing, introduce each topic and ask specific questions about the topic. If you wish to respond to a question, please use the "raise hand" facility in Teams to indicate your desire to speak. I will give each of the participants who have raised their hands an opportunity to have their say. Only one participant may speak at a time. When you are invited to speak, you should unmute your microphone, and state your name and, if any, the person(s) or organisation(s) that you represent

There are a lot of issues to consider at some sessions, so please make your response brief and focused and do adhere to the agenda. You won't need to repeat your full case in detail, or give any sort of formal presentation, as I will have read all of your representations. I may ask questions about aspects of your verbal or written submissions. When I have heard from you and am about to move on to the next participant, your microphone should be muted. (If you are a telephone participant you can mute by using \*6.)

There will not be any cross examination or participant interruption, and responses should always be directed to me. Unless a discussion is appropriate, I will normally invite participants (other than the Council) to speak only once on each separate matter that is on the agenda, so please be patient until it is your turn, and say what you need to say about the matter in question when you have the opportunity. N.B. Most sites/policies will be considered under a number of different issues that will be discussed separately. It will assist my understanding of the differences between representors and the Council if we go through the individual points one by one rather than discussing all concerns about a particular site allocation together. I may invite further contributions, on a particular matter, if it is likely to enable me to gain a better understanding of the evidence, but I will curtail the repetition of points already made.

If you have already spoken on a particular matter but believe that you could help further on the subject, you can raise your hand again. However, please use this facility sparingly and only when you have new, important and relevant evidence which will help me gain the information that I need to comprehensively consider the proposal's soundness. Raising your hand simply to repeat what you or others have already said, or to register that you don't agree with another participant, is not appropriate. I will terminate the discussion on any particular topic when I have enough information. As we move towards the end of each topic or sub-topic, I will ask the Council for their comments on the points raised, if I have not already done so. At the end of each hearing, I will end the session and ask all participants to log out.

## Documents, evidence and presentation

The examination website contains all of the relevant examination documents. These are available to all participants, stakeholders and the public. The hearing will not therefore use the document sharing facility available on Zoom. Nor should you hold any document in front of your camera. New documents should only be submitted during the hearings at my invitation. If I request a new document from any party, for example a statement of common ground, it should be emailed straight to the Programme Officer ([louise@poservices.co.uk](mailto:louise@poservices.co.uk)) so that she can pass it to me and put it onto the website. The chat facility in Zoom must not be used under any circumstances nor should the reaction facility.

## Conduct

Local plan examination hearings are a formal event, that require appropriate conduct from participants. The views and evidence of all participants are treated with fairness and consideration, and participants do not interrupt each other. You should dress in a manner that respects the important nature of the event and make your contribution respectfully. You should use the formal Mr, Mrs and so on, not first names, and the Inspector is addressed in the usual way as "Sir". You should have made appropriate arrangements to ensure that your working environment is quiet, and that the hearing (and your ability to concentrate on it) is not disrupted by external noise and unnecessary distractions. It is a good idea to have a jug and glass of water or a soft drink with you during the hearing session, but eating, snacking and drinking out of bottles is not appropriate whilst giving evidence. Coffee and comfort breaks will be built into the programme.

Those who use Teams and Zoom will have grown used to the idea that people can come and go during virtual meetings. However, that does not apply to examination hearings. You must make sure that you attend the hearing to which you are invited from start to finish. Leaving the screen midway through a session, coming and going, and leaving early, are not respectful to the hearing, and you may miss the opportunity to speak or to come back on a particular point that is of concern to you.

To make the best use of hearing time and to avoid disruption, the virtual hearings will start strictly at the time indicated on the agenda. You will receive an invitation from the Programme Officer to the relevant session or sessions. You must join the hearing on Zoom at least 15 minutes before the time indicated on the agenda. You will then be held in a waiting lobby until you are admitted into the hearing by the Programme Officer. Attempting to join the hearing after the time indicated on the agenda is not appropriate and you may not be admitted.

Hear other people's contributions and listen to my announcements. When adjournments are announced, please make a careful note of the resumption time and be back at your screen before that time.

## Privacy

Please have regard to the privacy notice. A copy will be sent to participants and posted on the Examination webpage once it has been concluded. Each hearing will be livestreamed on the internet. Please ensure that your camera is

positioned to provide a clear, front-on view of your face and avoid sitting where you are silhouetted in front of a window or light. You can turn off your camera if you don't want your image to be viewed. Please inform the Programme Officer before the hearing if you wish to do this. If you are dialling into the meeting using a telephone, you can keep your number private by dialling 141 before the conference number. The hearings will be recorded for reference. Please do not make your own recording of a hearing. You must ensure that no-one else appears on your camera and you should clear your background of personal information. If you prefer, Zoom allows you to blur your background, but please do not use any of the other backgrounds that are available on Zoom. You must not share any personal information during the hearing, either yours, or anyone else's.

## Use of Zoom

Please do familiarise yourself with Zoom before joining the hearings. You will be responsible for making sure that all of your equipment is functional and that you have everything in place and working to enable you to join the hearing via Zoom. If you experience electronic interference during the session, try switching off your mobile phone or other electronic devices nearby, if you have not already done so. If you experience internet connectivity issues, try switching off some other devices which share your Wi-Fi, or move closer to the router. If you are unable to join, or lose connection during the hearing, try to join again using the link provided in your invitation. The hearing may continue in your absence. As backup you can re-join by telephone using the number in the invitation. Transferring from Wi-Fi to mobile data or making a WI-FI hotspot using a mobile phone are other contingencies you could try. We are running test events for anyone who is unfamiliar with Zoom, or is concerned about joining a virtual hearing. You will receive an invitation with details of the dates from the Programme officer. If you are interested, please contact her to book a place.

Finally, I should like to extend my thanks in advance to all those who are participating, to the Council, and also to Louise St John Howe, the Programme Officer. As you will know, all the examination documents are on the website, but if you need assistance, the Programme Officer is there to help. As always, she will also be pleased to help you with any administrative or procedural queries that you may have during the examination.

Mel Middleton

INSPECTOR

July 2020