

Question to Cabinet - 9 February 2021

Question 1: Russell Haggar Vice Chair, Welwyn Planning and Amenity Group

In the CPPP session held on 23rd January last year, there was discussion about whether or not sites Wel1, Wel2, Wel6 and Wel15 should be included in the WHBC Local Plan. They were up for discussion as a result of having passed the site selection process during 2019, despite no consideration having been taken during that process of the consequences of building the external road infrastructure required to service and access these development sites.

As a consequence of this, much of that CPPP discussion related to how the infrastructure necessary to support those sites would affect amenities throughout Welwyn, particularly in regard to the area of Singlers Marsh. Singlers Marsh is formally recognised for its wildlife, natural environment and archaeological status, including playing host to a fragile and rare river system.

The earlier 2019 Call for Sites consultation had focussed on environmental issues relating only to development work at each individual site. That consultation made no effort to seek opinions about the environmental or other consequences of any consequent development work away from the sites themselves. In particular, the 2019 Call for Sites consultation made no mention of any possibility of building on Singlers Marsh itself as part of the Wel1/Wel2/Wel6/Wel15 proposals, and hence no opinions about this were solicited from either the public or any of the usual interested voluntary/statutory organisations.

In discussion with one of the councillors during that January 2020 CPPP session, a council officer seemed to say that – in proposing those four sites at that time for inclusion in the Local Plan – there had already been a consultation about the possibility of building on part of the Singlers Marsh land, with no adverse responses. Following that CPPP session, WPAG submitted a Freedom of Information request to ascertain what consultations, if any, had actually been made about developing on Singlers Marsh itself. The FOI response demonstrated that there had been no such consultations; no opinions had been sought, nor had any been received unsolicited. There had only ever been consultations (as part of the Call for Sites process) about the effects on Singlers Marsh of development at each individual site. No consultation has ever been disclosed about development of Singlers Marsh itself, and we believe that no such consultation has ever been undertaken.

Since last January, comprehensive plans for expanding the road network surrounding these four sites have emerged, drawn up by their development advocates and submitted to WHBC and HCC for consideration. These plans propose the remodelling of Codicote Road (south of the roundabout), substantially upgrading the Link Road/Fulling Mill Lane/Codicote Road junction, creating an extra bridge across the river (at the expense of Singlers Marsh land) and widening Fulling Mill Lane (also at the expense of Singlers Marsh land). These plans were prepared in readiness for adding these four sites to the Local Plan, but were not disclosed publicly as part of the Call for Sites consultation. It is clear that a lot of effort went into planning for the necessary infrastructure expansion to support development at these sites. None of this was included in the Call for Sites consultation. Can the

council now confirm, unequivocally and unambiguously, whether or not any consultation ever actually took place about any development on Singlers Marsh land itself? If it did, please indicate where such information can be found. If it did not, please update the official public record to indicate this. Furthermore, if indeed it did not, can WHBC confirm that no development of any of the land at Singlers Marsh would ever be proposed, let alone occur, without a meaningful and comprehensive public consultation, to include informed contributions regarding its standing and official designations as to its wildlife, natural environment and archaeological heritage status?