

WELWYN HATFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL
CABINET PLANNING AND PARKING PANEL – 17TH AUGUST 2023
REPORT OF THE ASSISTANT DIRECTOR (PLANNING)

BIRCHALL GARDEN SUBURB MASTERPLAN

1 Executive Summary

- 1.1 Birchall Garden Suburb is a large strategic site to the southwest of Welwyn Garden City straddling the boundary between Welwyn Hatfield and East Hertfordshire. A joint masterplan has been prepared to ensure the site is planned comprehensively to create a new sustainable community incorporating Garden City Principles. The policy position of the adopted East Herts District Plan and emerging Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan is that any application for development should be preceded by, and be consistent with, a masterplan.

2 Recommendation(s)

- 2.1 That Cabinet Planning and Parking Panel (CPPP) recommend to Cabinet that the Birchall Garden Suburb Masterplan, as detailed in Appendix A, be agreed as a material consideration for Development Management purposes.

3 Explanation

- 3.1 The Welwyn Hatfield Draft Local Plan (2016, incorporating proposed modifications 2023) is at an advanced stage of preparation. The Plan sets out the Council's strategy for delivering growth in the Borough over the Plan period up to 2036. This includes the development of new neighbourhoods and neighbourhood extensions masterplanned according to Garden City Principles.
- 3.2 The Plan sets out that a comprehensive approach will be taken to large sites. Masterplans will provide a spatial framework that will be agreed by the Council prior to the determination of any relevant planning application. They will set out the vision and objective for the development; establish the quantum and distribution of land uses; identify sustainable transport linkages and a movement hierarchy; and establish the core design concepts for the site building on the principles set out in the Local Plan.
- 3.3 Masterplanning is not a one-size-fits-all approach, the process is based upon a collaborative approach to identifying and resolving issues, creating a vision for what the site aspires to achieve, testing design options and seeking views upon preferred solutions. The output of this process is a Masterplanning Framework or Masterplan which is presented to members for consideration.
- 3.4 Birchall Garden Suburb is a large strategic site to the southwest of Welwyn Garden City straddling the boundary between Welwyn Hatfield and East Hertfordshire. The area within East Hertfordshire was removed from the Green Belt and allocated for development in the East Hertfordshire District Plan (adopted in 2018). The area within Welwyn Hatfield is proposed in the draft Local Plan for partial removal from the Green Belt and allocation for development, unlike the land in East Hertfordshire,

some parts of the development within Welwyn Hatfield will remain Green Belt. All land in Welwyn Hatfield remains Green Belt until the adoption of the draft Local Plan.

- 3.5 Policy SP19 of the Welwyn Hatfield Draft Local Plan (2016, incorporating proposed modifications 2023) and Policy EWEL1 of the East Hertfordshire District Plan 2018 share the same policy requirement for the production of a jointly prepared strategic masterplan document for Birchall Garden Suburb.
- 3.6 The policy requirement is for 1950 homes to be delivered over the plan period, 600 in Welwyn Hatfield Borough and 1350 in East Herts District which will be planned comprehensively to create a new community incorporating Garden City principles.
- 3.7 The identified 600 homes in Welwyn Hatfield is a reduction from the 1200 proposed in the submitted Draft Local Plan (2016) as, through the Examination of the Draft Local Plan, the Inspector concluded that development on area by the A414 would be unsound.
- 3.8 Policy SP19 sets out that a joint masterplan should be prepared setting out the quantum and distribution of land uses, access and sustainable transport measures, sustainable design and layout principles, the approach to character areas and site density, treatment of ecological and heritage assets including key views, the approach to land remediation, locations of Gypsy and Traveller sites, and phasing and delivery of infrastructure, mineral extraction and built development.
- 3.9 A masterplan for Birchall Garden Suburb has been prepared and is included as Appendix A. The document has been produced by Consultants Allies and Morrison who were jointly commissioned by Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council (WHBC) and East Herts District Council (EHDC). The consultant team have worked closely with officers from both authorities, Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) and a number of other statutory and community stakeholders.
- 3.10 A project Steering Group was established, this comprised Local and Parish councillors from both authorities, a representative from Friends of Panshanger Park, and the landowner Tarmac. The Steering Group helped shape development of the masterplan via a series of meetings/workshops. The document has also been subject to a public information event.
- 3.11 The landowner, Tarmac, remains opposed to the smaller / reduced site allocation within Welwyn Hatfield and has submitted representations to this effect to the Local Plan Inspector, the Councils, and at various stages during the preparation of the masterplan as a member of the steering group.
- 3.12 In summer 2023, the agent for the landowner set out that they considered the masterplan should provide for development over the whole of the area that they propose for development through their submitted outline application. Reference was given to the then current circumstances and uncertainty surrounding the future of the draft Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan for their position.
- 3.13 It was also cited that there was no basis for the Masterplan to treat the southern part of the Welwyn Hatfield portion “differently”, for example by “ghosting out”, as was suggested by officers. It was confirmed that the landowner remained willing to fund the completion of the Masterplan if it were to differentiate between the East Herts and Welwyn Hatfield portions of the whole site, for example by “ghosting out” the entire Welwyn Hatfield portion. The landowner considered, unlike any

differentiation within the Welwyn Hatfield portion, differentiation across the district boundary would be justified, in that the East Herts portion of Birchall Garden Suburb is allocated for development in the Council's adopted District Plan.

- 3.14 The draft Local Plan is at an advanced stage of preparation, it is considered the masterplan should reflect the Inspector's recommendations which concluded that it would not be a sound outcome to allocate the fields to the immediate north of the A414 for residential development. As a result, the number of dwellings in the Welwyn Hatfield portion of the site have been reduced from 1,200 homes to 600 homes, and subsequently, the connection to the A414 has been removed for general traffic. The Inspector specifically notes that the land to the south would not provide a sound outcome because of the impact such development would have on the visual openness of the wider Green Belt and the consequent experience of users of the open countryside to the south, as well as the potential harm to the setting of heritage assets.
- 3.15 The masterplan has progressed reflecting the area identified for development in adopted East Herts District Plan and the Welwyn Hatfield draft Local Plan (2016 and incorporating main modifications 2023). The masterplan has been funded by Welwyn Hatfield and East Herts.
- 3.16 In June 2022 Tarmac submitted an outline planning application for development at Birchall Garden Suburb. The submitted application is a proposal for an extension to Welwyn Garden City that extends into land that would remain in the Green Belt post adoption of the Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan. The masterplan which is the subject of this report reflects the Policy position of Welwyn Hatfield. The submitted planning application is under consideration. The policy position of the adopted East Herts District Plan and emerging Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan is that any application for development should be preceded by, and be consistent with, the Masterplan.
- 3.17 Endorsement of the Birchall Garden Suburb Masterplan by both Councils will enable the document to be used for development management purposes to help shape the future delivery of the site.
- 3.18 **Masterplan Process**
- 3.19 Since September 2022 Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council and East Herts District Council have been working with consultants Allies and Morrison to prepare a masterplan for the site. The purpose of the masterplan is to ensure that the new suburb is planned and delivered comprehensively to create a new sustainable community incorporating Garden City principles. The appointment of Allies and Morrison was a joint commission by the two councils.
- 3.20 Following analysis of a wide range of background and contextual site information, the consultant team worked closely with statutory and local stakeholders to analyse site constraints and opportunities and develop a vision for the site and outline the parameters of the masterplan. A series of technical workshops were held with council officers and colleagues from HCC Highways, the Growth and Infrastructure Unit and Minerals and Waste teams to identify key issues and help shape draft proposals for the site in line with best practice guidance for placemaking.
- 3.21 Design work has been overseen and guided by input from the Birchall Garden Suburb Steering Group, formed of local and parish councillors, representatives from Friends of Panshanger and the landowner Tarmac. The purpose of the group, as set out in their terms of reference, was to "*consider all matters relating to the*

proposed development at Birchall Garden Suburb with the aim of working together to achieve a high quality development which meets both Councils' place making, corporate and community aspirations and objectives for Welwyn Garden City and the wider communities in East Herts District and Welwyn and Hatfield Borough".

- 3.22 A series of four Steering Group meetings were held between November 2022 and March 2023. Officers from both councils and HCC were also present at meetings to provide specialist advice where necessary.
- 3.23 Various design options were discussed and tested such as where schools and district centres should be located, identification of access requirements (e.g. for bus and emergency services) and key routes and principles for active travel such as the use of signalised junctions over roundabouts. Development of the 'Green Corridor' and incorporation of wider urban greening was a key consideration in the design process. Density of development across the site, sustainable design and construction and addressing the impacts of other onsite employment uses were also explored in detail. All presentations and meeting notes have been shared with the group throughout the masterplan development process.
- 3.24 In January 2023 the Draft Masterplan proposal was presented and tested at the Hertfordshire Design Review Panel, an independent and impartial process for evaluating the design quality and sustainability of development proposals in Hertfordshire. Following a site visit the panel of multidisciplinary experts reviewed the draft masterplan and gave constructive criticism, the feedback from which has enabled the design to be further refined and improved. Recommendations of the Design Review Panel were reported to the Steering Group and subsequent changes explained/agreed at the final meeting held on 22 March. The consultant team then worked to refine the document, which was shared with officers and the Steering Group in June 2023.

3.25 **Public Engagement**

- 3.26 At the request of the Steering Group, two community information sharing events were held prior to the document being considered for adoption by both Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council and East Herts District Council. The first event was held on Wednesday 12th July 2pm until 8pm at Panshanger Football Club, and the second Thursday 13th July, 2pm until 8pm at Howlands Baptist Church. 1528 invitation letters were sent out to residents and consultees and the events were also promoted via the Councils social media.

Next Steps

- 3.27 Should members choose to endorse the masterplan for Development Management purposes it will become a material consideration in determining applications for development at Birchall Garden Suburb. The masterplan will set the framework for more detailed planning of the site including development of design codes.

Implications

4 Legal Implication(s)

- 4.1 There are no direct legal implications associated with this report.

5 Financial Implication(s)

- 5.1 There are no financial implications arising directly in relation to this report. The masterplan will be a material consideration in determining planning applications for development at Birchall Garden suburb and as such will provide greater certainty for developers and hopefully reduce the risk of poor quality applications coming forward, being refused and then going to appeal.

6 Risk Management Implications

- 6.1 Production of a masterplan for Birchall Garden Suburb is compliant with emerging local plan policy SP9. The strategic masterplan provides a framework to guide future sustainable development of the site and should help to shape development proposals by setting standards for layout, design quality and phasing of development in the interests of the community. The masterplan will provide a useful tool for officers when negotiating with developers and landowners and ultimately determining applications for development on site and as such should reduce the risk of uncoordinated poor-quality development coming forward.

7 Security and Terrorism Implication(s)

- 7.1 There are no security and terrorism implications arising directly in relation to this report.

8 Procurement Implication(s)

- 8.1 There are no procurement implications arising directly in relation to this report. The masterplan has been jointly commissioned with East Herts District Council using existing budgets.

9 Climate Change Implication(s)

- 9.1 The masterplan proposes development on what is currently a greenfield site and as such has several climate change implications. Development of this scale will use high levels of raw materials and energy and a function of the development will obviously lead to greater energy consumption. Development of agricultural land will inevitably lead to more hard surfacing which can have implications for surface water runoff and drainage. Details of mitigation measures will be necessary at the planning application stage.
- 9.2 The masterplan promotes sustainable design and forms of development both in terms of construction and function of neighbourhoods. Having a masterplan in place should help to secure more sustainable forms of development by setting a framework for more detailed design and providing a tool for officers when reviewing applications and negotiating with developers.

10 Human Resources Implication(s)

- 10.1 There are no Human Resources implications arising directly in relation to this report. The presence of a masterplan for development management purposes will assist planning officers in decision making.

11 Health and Wellbeing Implication(s)

- 11.1 Health and wellbeing has been a key consideration in the masterplan design process. Facilitating active travel and prioritising walking, cycling and use of public transport has shaped the location of schools and community facilities. The form of

development and layout of streets has been designed to provide pleasant environments to encourage community engagement.

- 11.2 Each neighbourhood provides an area of community green space linked to walking and cycling routes across the central parkland to encourage active recreation and enable residents to connect to the surrounding natural environment. Whilst the site has a number of environmental constraints including heavy employment uses, the proposed design has made every effort to mitigate the potential negative impacts giving careful consideration to the type of location of development and use of planting and buffering where necessary.

12 Communication and Engagement Implication(s)

- 12.1 The allocation of the site for development has been consulted upon and the subject of examination by the Inspector's of both the East Herts District Plan and the Welwyn Hatfield Draft Local Plan over several years. The masterplan builds on the policy requirements of the two development plans and has been the subject to engagement with the Steering Group and most recently an information sharing event.

13 Link to Corporate Priorities

- 13.1 The subject of this report is linked to the Council's Corporate Plan, in particular Priority 1: Attractive and accessible green spaces – providing a variety of green spaces for all communities to enjoy, Priority 3: Quality homes through managed growth – delivering affordable homes to meet local need, high quality housing thriving neighbourhoods and sustainable communities, and Priority 4: A sense of community where people feel safe - Design and maintain attractive neighbourhoods which our communities can enjoy and take pride in.

14 Equality and Diversity

- 14.1 An Equalities Impact Assessment (EqIA) was not completed because this report does not propose changes to existing service-related policies or the development of new service-related policies.

07 July 2023

Jennifer Ponsford
Principal Planning Officer

Matthew Wilson
Planning Policy and Implementation Manager

Background papers: None

Appendices

Appendix A: Birchall Garden Suburb Masterplan