

Woolmer Green Parish Council

November 2019

GREEN GAP ASSESSMENT

Report by LUC for Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council

Published August 2019

Comments by Jed Griffiths on behalf of Woolmer Green Parish Council

Introduction

1. This statement has been prepared by Jed Griffiths MA DipTP FRTPI on behalf of Woolmer Green Parish Council. It has been compiled in response to the Green Gap Assessment Report, completed by LUC consultants for Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council, and published in August 2019. The report and its appendices form part of the evidence base for the Local Plan Examination, as documents EX160, EX160A, and EX160B.
2. The Parish Council has made a number of representations on the Submission Local Plan and to previous hearing sessions. Comments in this statement will hopefully contribute to the debate in the final stages of the Examination. This statement has also been considered and endorsed by Knebworth Parish Council, the neighbouring local council in North Hertfordshire.

Context

3. The Parish Council generally welcomes the publication of the report, and considers that it will make a valuable contribution to the evidence base which will support the Local Plan. During the earlier stages of the Examination the Parish Council has consistently stressed the role of the Green Belt in separating settlements from each other. One of the main purposes of the Green Belt, as set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), is to prevent the merger of towns. In Welwyn Hatfield, it has undoubtedly been successful in protecting the identity of villages. This view is expressed in paragraph 1.6 of the report which describes how the existing “local purpose” has helped to maintain identity.
4. As noted in paragraph 1.7 of the report, the Inspector has expressed some concerns about the future role of the Green Belt in performing this local purpose. The Inspector’s suggestion of specific policy designations to provide protection for the gaps between settlements, including villages, is set out as one of the main aims of the study. This is strongly supported by the Parish Council, as is the list of relevant settlements, shown on Figure 1.1.

Methodology

5. The methodology for the study, as set out in Section 2 of the report, is generally sound and comprehensive. The stepped approach to the assessment of each candidate area is clearly set out and consistent. Inclusion of the ratings from the Landscape Sensitivity Report (EX156), and the analyses of the gap values and opportunities give extra value to the process. Summaries and recommendations for each area complete the picture. The Parish Council's comments on the relevant area assessments are set out in the ensuing paragraphs.

Settlement Gap Assessments

Woolmer Green and Oaklands

6. As noted in the assessment, this is a particularly sensitive gap, which is only 40 metres wide at its narrowest point. Oaklands is not a small town, as described in the text. It is a linear settlement which, together with Mardley Heath, has grown up incrementally along the Great North Road (now the B197). The extension of the Green Belt to this part of Welwyn Hatfield was approved mainly to halt this pattern of development and the coalescence of the settlements.
7. The Parish Council agrees with the analysis of local features as set out in the assessment. Pressures associated with the sites promoted under the Council's 2019 Call for Sites are noted – this is welcomed by the Parish Council, which has objected to the potential inclusion of these areas in the Local Plan. The Parish Council broadly agrees with the recommendations of the assessment and supports the designation of the “gap policy area” as shown on the attached map,

Woolmer Green and Knebworth

8. In the view of Woolmer Green Parish Council, supported by Knebworth Parish Council, this is one of the most important gaps in the Borough. As noted in the assessment, its significance is not diminished by the presence of the care home to the west of the B197, and the development for housing of then former EnTech site. The Parish Council agrees with the analysis sections of the assessment, particularly the point that the gap could be vulnerable even to modest amounts of development.

9. The Parish Council therefore supports the recommendations and the designation of the “gap policy area” between the northern edge of Woolmer Green village and the Borough Council boundary adjoining Knebworth. This is of strategic importance to the Green Belt along the north-south route corridor.

Woolmer Green and Datchworth

10. The Parish Council recognises the description of this gap and its sensitivity, with reference to Landscape Character Area 37. In landscape terms the area does, in the words of the text, provide a strong rural setting to the village of Woolmer Green. Development on the rising ground towards Datchworth would cause considerable harm to this setting and to the integrity of the Green Belt.
11. In these circumstances, Woolmer Green Parish Council supports the recommendations at the end of the assessment and the possible designation of the “gap policy area” as depicted on the attached map. Nevertheless, it is suggested that the policy area should be extended to the south, so that it joins more clearly to the proposed gap between Woolmer Green and Oaklands.

Summary and Conclusions

12. Woolmer Green Parish Council, supported by Knebworth Parish Council, generally welcomes the publication of the report as it provides an extra layer of evidence for consideration at the final stages of the Examination Hearings. The methodology and the assessments are generally robust and give a thorough analysis of the important gaps between settlements, both within the Borough and on its boundaries.
13. In its conclusions and recommendations, the report reinforces the view of the Parish Council about the vital role, in Green Belt terms, of protecting the gaps between the settlements in the north-south route corridor. Arguably, these are the key elements of Green Belt policy in the Local Plan.
14. As explained above, and in previous representations to the Examination, the Parish Council wishes to stress the key importance of the gap between Woolmer Green and Knebworth. This point and other issues will be covered in more detail by the Parish Council at Stage 7 of the Examination Hearings.

1st November 2019