



WOOLMER GREEN PARISH COUNCIL

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Woolmer Green Parish Council's response to Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council's Draft Local Plan 2011-2031 consultation.

Woolmer Green Parish Council is greatly concerned at the huge numbers of houses required in Welwyn Hatfield as well as North Herts and Stevenage. The cumulative effect will mean that significant new infrastructure is required to be delivered at a time of economic restraint. Financing infrastructure is greatly reliant on s106 & CIL but although villages are to grow proportionately to the towns the revenue created by these means will be considerably less and not sufficient to fund larger projects. The Parish Council fear that existing facilities will be put under further strain and villages will be disadvantaged.

Woolmer Green Parish Council, although opposed to the release of Green Belt land, recognises the importance of having a robust Local Plan in place and that releasing Green Belt for development is unavoidable under the National Policy Planning Framework when there are insufficient brownfield sites to meet the identified housing need.

THE PROPOSED SITES IN WOOLMER GREEN

WGr3: Development here would join Woolmer Green to Knebworth and is outside the settlement area. Woolmer Green Parish Council objects to development here.

WGr4 & WGr5: Apart from coalescence Woolmer Green Parish Council want to protect this land from development as it creates an attractive feature on entering the village and adds rural character.

WGr1: This is a sloping site and there is concern that substantial development here will lead to drainage problems. This site is also behind industrial land that houses a chocolate factory, car repair workshop & showroom and a stone supplier. It should be noted that noise emanates from stone cutting at Cawdor Stone.

There is also a care home located here and the garden seating area looks out over the fields. Although views cannot be protected under planning law it is hoped that consideration would be given to the elderly and infirm residents of this home to mitigate the visual impact housing would cause if it was developed.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Green Belt: Woolmer Green Parish Council objects to the release of Green Belt land for development as it believes this is contrary to the original ethos of protecting the countryside from urban sprawl as well as safeguarding our agricultural land and epitomising rural character. The Parish Council notes that the most favourable site WGr1 makes a "significant contribution" (LP 12.8) to protecting the countryside.

By developing a significant portion of the whole field at site WGr1 it leaves the remaining portion, which separates Woolmer Green from Knebworth, vulnerable to future encroachment. The Parish Council welcomes the proposed introduction of a landscaped area which could create a natural boundary as well as mitigating the visual impact of development but this would need protecting in some way. Also how would this area be managed and by whom?

Woolmer Green is also awaiting the outcome of an application to build a solar farm on its boundary in the parish of Knebworth. If this were granted by the Secretary of State the Green Belt around the village would be reduced and the openness of our surrounding countryside greatly compromised.

Schools: The primary school in Woolmer Green has reached maximum capacity with no prospect of further expansion but it may be able to continue to accommodate Woolmer Green children by not accepting those from further afield under the Local Plan proposals. To not be able to accommodate all the children in the village that wish to attend their local school must be an indicator that the village has reached its full potential. There is a proposal for a new primary school in Knebworth, although its position beside a motorway and its accessibility via a winding lane and through two narrow bridges suggests a desperate measure, but Knebworth will not expand sufficiently to populate a new school; "500 to 850 dwellings per Form of Entry" according to North Herts Council's Infrastructure Delivery Plan 9.26, so where will the additional pupils come from? Woolmer Green Parish Council would want to ensure that its children are given priority admission to Woolmer Green School as local children attending their local school is where community cohesion begins and a strong community is the basis of a thriving village.

Woolmer Green does have an issue when it comes to secondary school allocations. A large proportion choose Monk's Walk School as it is the nearest school in our priority area but, inevitably, children who live at the northern end of the village miss out and are not allocated any of their choices as their nearest school is Barnwell which is not in our priority area. All the children that move into a new development at site WGr1 will be in this predicament and there will be increased numbers of appeals.

Health Care: Many Woolmer Green residents rely on the Knebworth doctor's surgery which is less than adequate to meet current needs and identified as "constrained" in North Herts Council's Infrastructure Delivery Plan (table 18). The current premises has little scope for expansion and an increased population in Knebworth as well as Woolmer Green, an aging population and modern clinical practice of transferring some care away from hospitals into the community will further compromise the service it provides. A new improved or additional surgery will

be required for the provision of adequate quality health care. Woolmer Green Parish Council fears that any new facilities or improvements in health care provision will be prioritised in the larger developments around the towns at the expense of the villages.

Drainage: There are no surface water drains in Woolmer Green and drainage is reliant on the lie of the land and the level of the water table. Increasingly some areas in Woolmer Green are becoming susceptible to flooding in periods of rainfall; particularly near to large paved frontages, although not endangering any housing. One issue which Highways have not been able to resolve is the run off from fields in Wych Elm Lane that runs down Bridge Road, accumulates at the entrance to Hall Lane and continues onto the B197. Site WGr1 where 150 houses are proposed has a similar topography and a section of New Road, adjacent to Paynes Farm, has flooded significantly; almost to the height of a car, very recently. Substantial measures would need to be taken to ensure that water from this sloping site does not drain onto roads or cause problems to nearby properties if it was developed.

Sewerage: Like most villages the sewerage system in Woolmer Green is extremely old and invariably there are problem areas. Residents in Bridge Road have had ongoing issues with the sewers backing up and a temporary fix was constructed at the entrance to Bridge Road from London Road. This temporary measure will be put under strain as more sewerage systems are incorporated.

There have also, in the past, been blockages in the sewers between 17 and 47 London Road.

Roads: The B197 that runs through the village, which is the overflow for the A1M, is of great concern to the residents of Woolmer Green as well as the school and the ultimate aim is to achieve a 30mph limit. The Parish Council prepared a Parish Plan detailing the problems with the road and has achieved a road narrowing scheme that will slow down traffic and strengthen the case for the speed limit reduction. The Parish Plan highlighted the areas in need of attention which mainly centred on the junctions with London Road. However there are still issues with the junction at Mardleybury Road which is considered dangerous and where several minor accidents have occurred and the Parish Council are keen for improvements to be implemented here in the near future.

Creating a new junction onto the already busy B197 is likely to cause new problems; particularly as the access road is close to three employment areas that accept regular deliveries from HGV's. In the case of Marshall's these deliveries offload onto the highway and cause obstructions fairly regularly.

Although the A1M is the main access route between the nearest towns the B197 remains a particularly busy road which comes to a near standstill when the motorway is closed which is not infrequent. For example on Tuesday 17th February commuters took one & a half hours to travel from Woolmer Green to Stevenage due to the closure of the A1M. As well as significant development along the B197 corridor further traffic will be generated if Oaklands or Datchworth children are admitted to a new Knebworth primary school.

It is also clear that a substantial number of commuters prefer using the B197 rather than the congested A1M and the planned improvement to introduce "All Lanes Running" will only alleviate the current issues.

Railway: Woolmer Green commuters rely on Knebworth station and at peak times the trains are at full capacity with many travellers not allocated a seat. The additional 400 houses proposed for Knebworth will increase strain on the railways. Parking at Knebworth station is also inadequate with no space to extend leading to parking problems in Knebworth's residential roads.

Buses: IDP 5.29 says "investment in the bus network will be required" but the County Council is currently reducing its spending on bus services. Funding may upgrade infrastructure but will not improve frequency of service.

It should be noted that in the Draft North Herts Local Plan 12,000 houses are proposed and 3,600 new jobs created. This disproportionate house to jobs ratio means that the majority of new residents in North Herts will be commuters.

THE FUTURE OF WOOLMER GREEN

In its recent history Woolmer Green had large employment areas in proportion to its size and as this has been redeveloped into residential housing since the 1980s the population of the village has grown considerably in recent years. Two significant employment areas remain; Marshall's & Entech.

Marshall's: Currently an eyesore. If this land became available it would provide an ideal and possibly the only opportunity to create a village centre to sustain Woolmer Green into the future. The Parish Council would support introducing a small parade of shops, essentially to include a convenience store, with associated sufficient parking. At present the approach to Woolmer Green from Knebworth gives the impression of entering an industrial area rather than a village so the Parish Council would like to see the remainder of the land developed into low density housing and open space in keeping with its aspiration of improving the visual appearance of the village.

Entech: As long as the landscape frontage remains and is protected the Parish Council would take a more flexible approach to its development; housing or a mix of housing & employment would be supported. However if there is an opportunity to develop this site into residential in order to protect the Green Belt the Parish Council would favour this approach and this was the preference of residents at our Public Meeting on 11 March 2015.

Past development has not always been appropriate or of good quality design which is why the Parish Council consider it essential to introduce character to enhance the village if the opportunity arises.

Since the Spar shop closed the village has lacked, not only a convenience store, but a focus point in the village. To re-establish a small shop is considered a high priority but a "farm shop" proposed by the landowner of WGr1, tucked away from the high street, is unlikely to be a viable solution. A high street location is essential for its

success and accessibility. Creating additional shop units in the high street is a priority if an opportunity arises.

The two remaining public houses of The Chequers and The Red Lion, including the parking areas, should be protected as they bring together & strengthen the community.

Woolmer Green Parish Council owns the village hall and grounds, including the Fields in Trust Community Orchard & Playground, and the Jolly Garden. It also maintains the playground adjacent to Garden Road on land owned by the Housing Trust and should be protected.

Woolmer Green Parish Council protect the village pond which is unowned Common Land and is maintained in accordance with a Countryside Management Service maintenance plan. This area is a wildlife pond and should be maintained accordingly by the encouragement of native species and protection of native trees.

The screening of trees in front of Entech House as Woolmer Green is approached from Knebworth is a significant landmark and should be protected.

IN CONCLUSION

Housing in Woolmer Green has increased significantly in recent years as brownfield sites that have become available have taken residential development. The school is at full capacity, Knebworth Surgery is under strain and the busy road that bisects the village is already causing major concern and will be put under further acute strain by new developments, not only in Woolmer Green, but elsewhere.

The Parish Council also fear an unintegrated housing development of this size would be out of keeping unless it is sensitively designed to incorporate open space and small roads with individual character or housing clusters. There is also a real concern that surface water drainage on the WGr1 site will cause problems.

The Green Belt around Woolmer Green is already in danger of being diminished if the solar farm were to be given the go ahead.

Lastly, Woolmer Green lacks the most basic of amenities to support a substantial increase in residents.

For these reasons Woolmer Green Parish Council believes that a further 160 houses, the majority on WGr1, is excessive and far more than can reasonably be accommodated.



Janet Pearce.
Clerk to Woolmer Green Parish Council.