

WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL – DEVELOPMENT CONTROL
DELEGATED REPORT

APPLICATION No:	S6/2007/1368/MA
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NOTATION:

The site lies within the Hatfield Aerodrome Inset Map No.3 area as designated in the Welwyn Hatfield District Plan 2005. It is land allocated for residential use in the masterplan adopted as part of the Hatfield Aerodrome Supplementary Planning Guidance in November 1999. The residential area Framework Plan approved by the Council in March 2002 shows this land as being appropriate for higher density development (40 – 60 dwellings per hectare).

DESCRIPTION OF SITE:

The application site is the area of vacant land which is the last part (Phase 4) of the residentially-allocated land remaining to be developed on Hatfield Aerodrome. This land is bounded by Mosquito Way and Central Park to the west, the car parks of the Bishop Square offices to the south, the new District Centre to the east, and the Next Generation Club (in the grade II* listed Comet hangar) to the north. On the opposite side of Mosquito Way to the site is the de Havilland Campus of the University of Hertfordshire. The land is predominantly flat, with a bund and semi-mature landscaping along the south and west boundaries.

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSAL:

The site for this application has an area of 2.7ha and has vehicular access from the existing roundabout on Mosquito Way. The proposal is a reserved matters application for 164 dwellings, and includes access roads, car parking and open space. A previous application for a similar development (ref: S6/2007/611/MA) was withdrawn in June 2007. The applicants also submitted an application for the Phase 4 infrastructure roads only (ref: S6/2007/1338/MA), which was refused on 6/12/07.

The current application is for all the matters reserved by the original outline application for the Hatfield Aerodrome redevelopment, namely siting, design, external appearance, means of access, and landscaping in respect of the Phase 4 housing development.

The scheme comprises both private and affordable housing. The private sale units are 22 five-bed houses, 16 three-bed houses and 73 two-bed apartments. The affordable units are 9 three-bed houses, 13 two-bed apartments and 31 one-bed apartments. The five-bed houses are in semi-detached pairs, mainly fronting onto Mosquito Way, and the majority of the apartments are located in T-shaped blocks encircling a central green area. Most of the development is at three-storey height, with four-storey elements as part of the T-shaped blocks. There are also two other flat blocks of different design, Blocks 'F' and 'H', which each include three and four-storey elements. The proposed Block 'H' is located immediately to the south of the new six-storey flats at Clarkson Court.

The development would be served by a principal internal access road running west to east from the Mosquito Way roundabout to the eastern end of the site, which adjoins the new District Centre. A subsidiary access road and shared surface would serve the southern part of the site. Car parking is provided mainly in surface off-street parking areas and courtyards, for the flats and three-bed houses. Those three-bed houses served by the shared surface have adjacent spaces identified for them, whilst the five-bed houses have parking in integral garages or on plot.

The current application is accompanied by a Supplementary Design Statement, prepared by the scheme architect on behalf of both Bovis Homes and Taylor Wimpey as applicants, an Environmental Noise Assessment prepared by acoustic consultants, and an assessment of the scheme against EcoHomes and Code for Sustainable Homes standards.

PLANNING HISTORY:

S6/1999/1064/OP – Outline application for mixed use redevelopment of Hatfield Aerodrome site in accordance with masterplan; permitted 29/12/00.

S6/2004/169/DE – Reserved matters application for 60 dwellings (on part of Phase 4); withdrawn 26/7/04.

S6/2004/1081/DE – Reserved matters application for 60 dwellings (on part of Phase 4); withdrawn 27/2/05.

S6/2007/611/MA – Reserved matters application for 164 dwellings; withdrawn 25/6/07.

S6/2007/1338/MA – Reserved matters application for infrastructure roads (to serve development of 164 dwellings); refused 6/12/07.

SUMMARY OF DEVELOPMENT PLAN POLICIES AND GUIDANCE:

PPS1	Delivering Sustainable Development
PPS3	Housing
PPG13	Transport

Hertfordshire Structure Plan Review 1991 – 2011:
None

Welwyn Hatfield District Plan 2005:

SD1 Sustainable Development

R3 – Energy Efficiency
R4 – Renewable Energy Sources
R19 – Noise and Vibration Pollution

D1 - Quality of design
D2 - Character and context
D3 – Continuity and Enclosure
D4 – Quality of the Public Realm
D5 - Design for Movement
D6 – Legibility
D7 – Safety by Design

D8 - Landscaping
D9 - Access and Design for people with disabilities
D11 – Design Statements

H6 – Densities
H7 – Affordable Housing
H8 – Dwelling Type and Tenure

OS3 – Play Space and Informal Open Space

HATAER1 – Sustainable Development of the Site

M1 – Integrating Transport and Land Use
M5 – Pedestrian Facilities
M6 – Cycle Routes and Facilities
M14 – Parking Standards for New Development

Hatfield Aerodrome Supplementary Planning Guidance, November 1999
Welwyn Hatfield District Plan, Supplementary Design Guidance, February 2005
Welwyn Hatfield District Plan, Supplementary Planning Guidance, Parking Standards, January 2004

CONSULTATIONS

Hertfordshire County Council – Highways; Response by e-mail dated 5/10/07;
This response contains detailed comments about the road design layout, dimensions, visibility splays and parking recommendations. Subject to these comments the Highway Authority “will not raise any reasons to recommend refusal to this application”.

Hertfordshire County Council – Archaeologist; Letter dated 18/10/07; Recommends a condition for archaeological investigation on any consent granted.

Hertfordshire Constabulary; Letter dated 23/10/07; Some recommendations made by the Crime Prevention Officer have been incorporated in the scheme. It is also recommended that that the whole site is built in accordance with Secured by Design criteria.

English Heritage; Letter dated 3/10/07; No comments. The application should be determined in accordance with national and local policy guidance and on the basis of local specialist conservation advice.

BEAMS; Memorandum dated 31/10/07; Various detailed comments. Recommends refusal on the grounds that by way of the layout, form, massing, scale, height of buildings, lack of reference to development surrounding the site, and the detailed architectural treatment, lacks the quality required for this important site.

Environment Agency; Letter dated 30/10/07; No objection, provided that the applicant adheres to the water efficiency measures detailed within the application. Any approval will be subject to the outline planning conditions (on drainage).

Thames Water; Response by e-mail dated 20/9/07; No comments other than that the proposed development will drain to a private sewer network.

WHBC Housing Department; Response by e-mails dated 1/11/07 and 13/11/07; Supports improvements proposed by architectural advisor.

WHBC Environmental Health; Response by e-mail dated 1/11/07; To achieve adequate protection from road noise for the units fronting Mosquito Way, both acoustic glazing and active ventilation systems should be required. Further information I sought on night-time peak noise events.

During the course of the application the Council has sought advice from independent architects and this advice is summarised in the discussion section below.

TOWN/PARISH COUNCIL COMMENTS

No comments have been received from Hatfield Town Council. The period for response has expired.

REPRESENTATIONS

The application has been advertised by press notice dated 26/9/07 and site notice dated 1/10/07. Neighbouring residential occupiers at Clarkson Court and neighbouring commercial occupiers at Next Generation, Bishop Square and the University have been notified individually by letter, as has the de Havilland Residents' Association.

Representations received;

Letter dated 24/9/07 from the Welwyn Hatfield Access Group. The Group requests that the application is considered subject to the standards and criteria outlined in the current District Plan.

E-mail from Chairman of de Havilland Residents' Association dated 2/11/07; States that comments submitted on previous (withdrawn) application still apply i.e. the development will become an extension of the University accommodation, leading to problems with Houses in Multiple Occupation and associated noise and disturbance. The grouping of the three-bed affordable units together could contribute to undesirable behaviour amongst children. An adverse social relationship could arise between the occupiers of this housing and residents of the private units in Block 'H' if the latter are bought to let.

Three e-mails have been received from residents of Clarkson Court, expressing concerns over loss of light to existing flats, loss of outlook, overlooking, (these arising from the proposed Block 'H'), noise and disruption from building works.

DISCUSSION:

The main issues are:

1. **Appropriateness of the proposed housing numbers, density and mix.**
2. **Design considerations in relation to the Hatfield Aerodrome SPG, the adopted District Plan policies and Government guidance.**
3. **Impact on neighbouring residential occupiers.**
4. **Other material considerations.**

1. Appropriateness of the proposed housing numbers, density and mix.

Dealing first with the question of housing numbers, density and mix, the 1999 Hatfield Aerodrome SPG allots a nominal 130 units to this parcel of land, adjoining the District Centre. The outline permission for the redevelopment of the whole Aerodrome site, however, does not contain any reference to a set number of units. That permission, and its accompanying Section 106 Agreement, required the submission of a Framework Plan for the new residential area. This Plan was approved by Committee in March 2002 and showed the land adjoining the District Centre (Phase 4) as an area for relatively high density development at 40-60 dwellings per hectare.

The 164 dwellings proposed for Phase 4 would be delivered at a density of 60.74 dwellings per hectare, which is only very marginally outside the above range. Policy H6 of the adopted District Plan indicates that in areas of with good accessibility by modes of transport other than the car, residential development will be expected to be close to or exceed 50 dwellings per hectare, provided that the development will not have an adverse impact on the character of the surrounding area and can satisfy the design policies of the Plan. The Highway Authority, in its formal response to consultation, has raised no infrastructure capacity objection to the total number of units proposed.

In my view, therefore, the figure of 164 in the current application would be acceptable if the development were deemed appropriate in terms of layout, design and impact on adjoining developments. This is consistent with the more recent design-led approach to densities set out in PPS3. If implemented, the current proposal would lead to a total of 1045 units on the Aerodrome site, excluding the District Centre, as against the 1000 estimated in the Hatfield Aerodrome SPG. The District Centre site itself is already delivering significantly more units (467 in total) than originally envisaged in the SPG.

The proposals would deliver 53 of the 164 units as affordable housing, equivalent to 32.3% of the total units. This level has been agreed between the Council and the applicants as 30% of the nominal 130 units allotted to this land by the SPG plus 40% of the additional 34 units. This proportion satisfies both the Hatfield Aerodrome SPG and Policy H7 of the District Plan. A minimum of 25% of the total units would be for affordable rent, as specified in the original Section 106 Agreement, with the remainder as shared ownership housing. The mix and specification of the affordable units is acceptable to the Registered Social Landlord who would acquire them. The shape of the site and the design of the layout mean that although the affordable housing is all located centrally within the site, it is not clearly segregated.

The overall mix for the site does depart from the average mix detailed in the 1999 SPG – there are significantly fewer three- and four-bed units, and a heavy preponderance of one- and two-bed units (71% as opposed to 25-35% in the SPG). Policy H8 of the adopted District Plan, however, states that the Council will expect a mix of dwelling types in developments to reflect the shortfall of flats, bedsits and one and two bedroom properties in the district. The unusual shape and context of the Phase 4 site is also such that it lends itself more easily to development at three and four storeys in the form of flats.

Given the proximity of the University to this site, and the history of occupation of earlier phases, there is a concern that the five-bed houses fronting Mosquito Way (13% of the total units) will prove particularly attractive to the buy-to-let market and that there will be an incentive to convert some of these units to Houses in Multiple Occupation. In planning terms, however, there is arguably no clear reason why three-storey five-bed houses would be unacceptable along this frontage, and therefore in my view the only mitigating measure the local planning authority could take would be

to impose suitable conditions on any approval, designed to limit the number of independent occupiers of such units and thereby minimise any car parking or environmental issues arising.

For the above reasons, I consider that there is no objection in principle to the proposed scheme on the grounds of housing numbers, density or mix, or the quantity of affordable housing.

2. Design considerations

Section 13 of the Hatfield Aerodrome SPG gives general guidance on the design standards which are sought for this residential development. At the time of approval of the Residential Area Framework Plan in 2002, approval was also given to a Design Statement, prepared on behalf of Bovis and Taylor Woodrow Homes, which describes in more detail the approach to be adopted in different parts of the residential area. These pieces of guidance can now be set against Policy D1 of the adopted 2005 District Plan, which requires a high quality of design in all new development, and the other design policies and Supplementary Design Guidance associated with the Plan. PPS1 and PPS3, supported by documents such as 'By Design' set out the Government's position on design quality for new housing.

Discussions with the applicants and their architect concerning the scheme to come forward on Phase 4 have been taking place since August 2006 and have continued through the submission and withdrawal of the previous application S6/2007/611/MA. All parties to the design process, including the independent architects who have advised the Council, acknowledge that this is a difficult site to design for, due to its shape and its relationship to surrounding development, in particular the Grade II* listed hangar and the new flats at Clarkson Court. On the local authority side, we have also seen this context as offering an opportunity for imaginative and innovative design; a point which has been made clear to the applicants over several years of informal discussion concerning the Aerodrome residential development.

The layout approach which has been taken by the applicants is to create a strong curving frontage to Mosquito Way, presenting the most public face of the development and echoing the continuous crescent development on the opposite side of central park. The point of vehicular access to the site is fixed, and the application shows a conventional access road from this point bisecting the site and penetrating to its eastern end. Either side of this access road is then the strongest layout feature, which is an elliptical arrangement of the 'T'-shaped three- and four-storey flat blocks, centred on an open green area, immediately to the south of by the access road. Development in the eastern part of the site is essentially linear, as dictated by the narrowness of the site at this end, and is punctuated by Block 'H', the footprint of which is designed to mitigate the building's impact on the Clarkson Court flats. To the south of the T-blocks is a secondary curving row of three-bed, three-storey houses, served by a secondary access road and a shared surface. The application is supported by a Design Statement prepared by the architect, which attempts to develop the broad guidance given in the approved 2002 Design Statement.

Whilst discussions with the applicants over the past year have concentrated on working with this layout, it is clear that despite the efforts of all parties there are certain unresolved difficulties. These difficulties are reflected in the comments received from context 4D, the Council's urban design advisor, and those from BEAMS.

The standard road layout tends to dominate the internal arrangement of the site and compromises to some extent the function and attractiveness of the central green

space. The approach taken by the applicants in submitting a separate application for the roads only (ref: S6/2007/1338/MA) as the first part of the development runs contrary to current design advice on designing holistically for a site and allowing the arrangement of building blocks to dictate vehicular routes. Although there is a clear form to the layout of T-blocks, this is inward looking and does not present a coherent relationship to either the listed hangar or to Central Park. A major associated problem is that the car parking areas serving these flats are relatively extensive, and disposed in an irregular way, with a potentially adverse effect on both visual amenity and legibility. Permeability for pedestrians in a north-south direction through the site is also complicated.

The Mosquito Way frontage is more successful, but is compromised by the lack of a distinct entrance statement at the junction of the internal access road with the roundabout. The narrow eastern projection of the site is acknowledged as challenging, but it is clear that Block H, which terminates the development, does not relate satisfactorily in terms of visual impact to the Clarkson Court flats, or provide a suitable transition to the heart of the District Centre beyond. Although there is a limited amount of car parking shown under the building, there is still an extensive surface parking area proposed for the eastern end of the site, which is visually unsatisfactory. The southern part of the site, to the rear of the properties fronting the shared surface, contains certain unresolved elements of 'left-over' space and two pairs of semi-detached units which are somewhat isolated and surrounded by rear boundary treatments.

Concerning the elevational treatments proposed, these have been critically appraised by both the Council's architectural advisor at SHP (GHM Architects) and by BEAMS. The general feeling is that an opportunity has been missed to recognise the site's unique context and to seek a high quality of contemporary design in accordance with Government guidance. BEAMS comments that the massing, bulk and architectural treatment of the three and four storey blocks are poor and that "monopitched roofs constructed in stucco embossed aluminium with uPVC bargeboards and eaves details will be very dominant and out of character with the surrounding development. The proposals fail to integrate features that reflect those of surrounding buildings such as windows, doors, balconies, and external materials which might help to maintain a rhythm of development." In terms of the effect of the proposals on the setting of the grade II* listed building, English Heritage has not commented, but both context 4D and BEAMS have reservations about the designs proposed in proximity to this building.

Although the applicants have shown some willingness to work with the Council's architectural advisor at SHP, through an exchange of comments, and a number of his initial concerns have been resolved, the consensus of the expert advice received is that the elevational treatments do not demonstrate the level of originality, variety or distinctiveness which should be required on this prominent and historically important site.

One area where some progress has been made is in terms of sustainability, and the applicants have researched and proposed the use of ground source heat pumps to supply energy to the nine three-bed affordable houses, making use of available grant moneys. Although the enhancement of the existing CHP plant at the District Centre to provide energy to part of the phase 4 residential development has been explored and proved to be difficult both practically and commercially, the applicants are also considering the use of solar thermal panels on some of the affordable flat blocks.

The application presents a commitment to meet Code for Sustainable Homes level 3 in respect of the 53 affordable units and to meet the old EcoHomes Very Good standard in respect of the private units. This is to be encouraged, but cannot in itself outweigh the other problems with design which have been detailed above.

Overall on design, having given careful consideration to the proposals, I am of the opinion that they do not comply satisfactorily with the Hatfield Aerodrome SPG, the 2002 Design Statement, or Policies D1, D2, D3 and D6 of the 2005 District Plan.

3. Impact on neighbouring residential occupiers

The only direct impact of the proposed scheme on neighbouring residential occupiers is that of Block H on the occupiers of the nearest flat block in Clarkson Court. Inspection of the likely impact of the new block has taken place from both outside and inside the Clarkson Court flats. Because of the relative position and orientation of the two blocks, and the proximity of the northern projection of Block H to the Clarkson Court block (approximately 10m) I would take the view that this part of the development would have a significantly adverse effect on the amenity of some of the first, second and third floor flats in Clarkson Court by reason of loss of light and overbearing appearance.

4. Other material considerations

There are several other material considerations relating to this application, in terms of highway safety within the site, community safety and security, and mitigation of the effect of road noise from traffic on Mosquito Way. I am satisfied that these issues could be adequately dealt with by minor amendments to the submitted layout or by the imposition of suitable conditions. Other matters such as site drainage, contamination and archaeology would be dealt with by compliance with conditions attached to the outline permission (ref: S6/1999/1064/OP).

CONCLUSION:

Residential development is acceptable in principle on this site and already has the benefit of outline planning permission. The number of units proposed in this scheme is not of itself inappropriate, and the proportion of affordable housing proposed is in accordance with the Council's requirements. The housing mix, whilst it departs from the average mix envisaged in the Hatfield Aerodrome SPG, is not necessarily at odds with District Plan policy or with the specific physical characteristics and context of the site.

The main concern is that, despite discussion and negotiation over a period of a year or more, the design quality of the scheme does not live up to the expectations contained in the SPG, the 2002 Design Statement, the relevant District Plan policies or contemporary Government guidance. A second concern is the specific impact of the proposed Block H on the amenity of residential occupiers in Clarkson Court.

RECOMMENDATION: REFUSAL AND REASON (S)

REASONS FOR THE REFUSAL OF PERMISSION:

1. The proposal would not result in a development of sufficiently high design quality for this prominent site and would therefore be contrary to the provisions of the Hatfield Aerodrome Supplementary Planning Guidance 1999, Policies D1, D2, D3 and D6 and Supplementary Design Guidance of the Welwyn Hatfield District Plan 2005, and the relevant provisions of PPS1 and PPS3.

2. The proposed Block H, through its height, massing and location, would have a significantly adverse effect on the residential amenity of the closest flats in Clarkson Court through loss of light and overbearing appearance, contrary to the provisions of the Supplementary Design Guidance to the Welwyn Hatfield District Plan 2005.

DRAWING NUMBERS:

Site Location Plan 400290/002.

Site Layout Plan 400290/LO-005 Revision N and date stamped 20/11/07.

House type drawings 400290/010E, 011C, 012C, 014A, 015D, 017H, 022E, 023F, 028C, 030B, 031D.

Landscape drawings Hat4-03-100 Rev B, Hat4-03-101.

Signature of author..... Date.....