

WELWYN GARDEN CITY SOCIETY

Objections to advertisements on roundabouts within Welwyn Garden City

Planning Department
Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council
Campus East
Welwyn Garden City
AL8

August 27 2012

Dear Sirs

I am writing on behalf of the Welwyn Garden City Society to register our objection to this planning application as well as to all others where there is a proposal to place advertisements on roundabouts within Welwyn Garden City.

The reasons for our objection are as follows:

1 Garden City Principles

The proposal to place sponsorship signs of the size proposed on all roundabouts within the town is at variance with the ideals upon which Welwyn Garden City was founded. The Council has for decades maintained firm control over advertisements, particularly in the town centre and the rest of the regulated areas – see 2 below. With the proliferation of street furniture and clutter (see 3 below also) this is no time to intensify the density of advertising material. Although each advertisement may in itself be modest in size, it is the cumulative effect which undermines attempts to maintain an uncluttered look within the town and the regulated areas.

Welwyn Garden City is different from most other towns. It is a planned environment. It was conceived by Ebenezer Howard as a marriage of town and country - a shelter from the metropolitan pressures of London. A strictly enforced embargo on public advertisements throughout the town is evidence of this, and it has served it well over its ninety years. It is Arcadian in concept and, in part, this is due to the lack of commercial advertisements in any public place throughout the town with the notable exception of the poster booths in Howardsgate which specifically constrained the issue to these and other sites at the time they were erected. Successive Councils, irrespective of the political colour of the majority party, have maintained this approach since the foundation of the town ninety years ago.

Not only are “Garden City principles” specifically referred to in Section 52 of the National Planning Policy Framework but the proposal is clearly against Section 60 of the same policy document which indicates that it is perfectly right to support local distinctiveness (in this case a well-established policy of no advertisements within the town).

This difference must be jealously guarded, in order to maintain the town’s unique character, and to ensure it remains clearly differentiated from other towns. This uniqueness is likely to be a key feature of its future marketing and promotion strategy by the Town Centre Partnership as it fights to attract new businesses into our town centre.

It is ironic that only recently the Council and the Society were jointly opposing an appeal to the continued presence of advertising signs set up by Lidl on grass verges at Moors Walk - thereby supporting the decades old advertising policy of the town - when, now, another department of the Council seems to be proceeding as if this were not a Garden City principle.

We therefore object to the proposals which should be rejected on grounds of amenity as they are completely out of character with the Garden City concept.

2 Conservation Area

Large areas of the town, on both east and west of the centrally placed railway line, have been designated as Conservation Areas (the Handside area, including the whole of the town centre, and the Beehive area). Two of the proposed sponsored roundabouts are located in a Conservation Area – applications numbered N6/2012/1456/AD and N6/2012/1466, and we maintain that advertisements of the type submitted should not be in any event be installed in these Conservation Areas.

Further, the proposals as submitted do not show any evidence of the Council's role to pay "special attention to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of...." conservation areas since neither this application nor any of the others dealing with advertisements on roundabouts either in this town or indeed elsewhere make any distinction as between Conservation Areas and other parts of the town. [Section 72 Planning (Listed Buildings and Conversation Areas) Act 1990]

We therefore object on the grounds that the Council has failed to properly exercise its duty as regards the town's Conservation Areas.

3 Street Clutter

Installation of the proposed advertisements runs counter to the current Government's recommendations on street clutter and the recommendations made by the Communities Secretary, Mr Eric Pickles, and the then Transport Secretary, Mr Hammond, who have recently written to all Councils on this very point. Street clutter adds to the burden of drivers by reason of distraction (see 4 below) and is dangerous.

We therefore object on the grounds that in the planned environment of Welwyn Garden City the proposed advertisements are mere clutter which perform no beneficial function in road traffic terms and is contrary to Government policy.

4 Driver Distraction

With high traffic densities evident at peak times in WGC, it seems to us to be irresponsible, and indeed dangerous, to place advertisements in specific sites where a very high degree of driver concentration is required. The very design of roundabouts, with drivers having to give way to traffic from the right, necessitates a driver looking to his right, stopping where and when required, and being ready to move off as soon as a gap appears. Anything that distracts a driver's attention from the need to be 100% aware must be seen to be a traffic hazard – in this case a wholly unnecessary hazard and one which cannot be justified.

We therefore object on the grounds that the proposed adverts constitute a road traffic hazard by reason of their siting at a location where 100% concentration is required on the part of all drivers.

5 Claimed reduction in Fly Posting

The proposals are partially justified on the grounds that they are likely to curtail illegal fly posting. So far as we are aware, this is not an issue in Welwyn Garden City. We also suggest that the idea of using vacant advertisement space to post current Borough Council initiatives, e.g., curtailing litter dropping, new recycling schemes, will be counterproductive. In the first case, it will only draw attention to the nuisance and in the second, we suggest that the target market is well covered already by the Borough Council's communications strategy. Further, on the busiest roundabouts the target market will not be served since the traffic is largely commuter traffic from outside the town and borough. Most importantly, however, details of contact addresses and phone numbers will need to be included in these advertisements, with a consequent alarming increase in the need for drivers actually to read them! The consequences of such induced behaviour will then be seen in the road traffic casualty statistics.

We therefore object on the grounds that there are very few cases of illegal fly posting on roundabouts, or indeed elsewhere, except on the poster booths in Howardsgate itself, and that the increase in road safety risks by reason of information posted on vacant roundabouts is unacceptable. In fact, we reject both arguments as specious and should be ignored.

6 Ineffectiveness of advertisements in outlying roundabouts

We question why 11 of the 24 locations are on roundabouts in Panshanger. There cannot be an effective business case for attracting advertisers to mini roundabouts on the edge of the town. Some of these roundabouts have very low traffic levels, which accommodate purely local residential traffic that barely changes month after month. It appears that the plan is to carpet bomb Panshanger with advertising signs which will look ugly, and which will also be pointless when potential advertisers realise that many roundabouts carry very little traffic throughout most of the day.

We therefore object on the grounds that there is no business case for littering the roundabouts of this town with unwanted and unread advertisements.

We further question the essential business case for the entire proposition in the first place. It was trialled at a time when the economy was thriving. We are now in the middle of a double dip recession and there is no evidence that the business case has been revisited. The Society believes is that the Borough Council will lose money on this project if it goes ahead.

7. Ability to maintain roundabouts in a satisfactory, let alone exemplary, fashion

A cursory look at the three roundabouts where the trials of advertising material have been conducted demonstrates to us that the Council's contractors are unable to maintain these in an acceptable fashion. These do not enhance the advertiser's image in the case of the two advertisers whose names still remain on the roundabouts. In the case of the third, the advertiser's name is no longer present.

Yours faithfully



Chairman

Welwyn Garden City Society

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