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**Andrew Windscheffel**

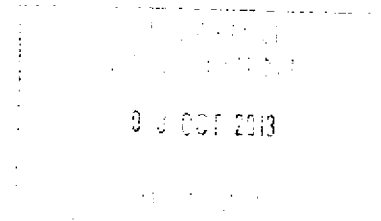
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SD

**From:** Planning Policy  
**Sent:** 07 October 2013 14:26  
**To:** Planning  
**Subject:** FW: Council Office Extension ref N6/2013/1938/MA

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**From:** Helen Bromley  
**Sent:** 07 October 2013 13:03  
**To:** Planning Policy  
**Subject:** Fwd: Council Office Extension ref N6/2013/1938/MA



Sent from Samsung Mobile

----- Original message -----

**Subject:** Council Office Extension ref N6/2013/1938/MA  
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Dear Councillors

I write to express concern with regard the proposed Council Office Extension in Welwyn Garden City reported in the WH Times, though I do offer an alternative proposal for consideration.

#### 1) Design Proposal

Firstly the proposal as currently presented is evidently completely out of character with the architecture in the town centre and opens up a precedent being led by the Council for future developments in WGC to move away from the unique character of the Garden City. The Council needs to show leadership in protecting our conservation area and ensure it seeks English Heritage's view before committing further funds to this proposal.

I am sure the Welwyn Garden City Society will challenge the proposal in the detail, and rightly so on the evidence so far, but one needs to ask why a design proposal was not invited from a local architect familiar with the heritage of the town as this may have avoided the additional cost posed by the challenge it will face? I have no objection to contemporary design, but in the right place please.

#### 2) The Business Case

I would challenge the view that this proposal can have a genuinely sound business case, particularly that it is not clear what other options have been considered for future council accommodation requirements. As it is, the present Council offices are 80 years old and lack the facilities of 21st century office amenities. So the building is already inefficient and indeed will be inadequate as the proposal indicates.

This is evidenced in the application which states that 240 persons are currently accommodated in a floor area of 5237sqm, which is more than twice the space that is proposed in the extension's further 1180sqm accommodating 120 people. However this itself is insufficient to meet the current real needs of 140 staff, let alone Council's potential long term requirements.

I have scrutinized a number of business cases in my time ranging from projects of £100,000s to £billions and one gets to know intuitively whether they are broadly good, bad or marginal. This does not feel good. I suspect this business case, in order to persuade the Councillors that it makes financial sense may have used transfer pricing values, for typically rent values, as opposed to genuine open market rents. In a similar manner to the inter-company transfer pricing used by Starbucks and other multinationals to avoid UK corporation tax!

Again without clarity of the options explored it is unclear how the business case can genuinely be assessed, but it is clear that it must be cheaper to accommodate office staff in appropriately efficient property outside WGC town centre.

Are we not seeking to reduce the overall burden on rate payers, and the Community Housing Trust residents, in a climate of continued financial constraint? We do look to our Councillors to secure real value for money for us all here, rate payers and rent payers.

### 3) A Vision for Welwyn and Hatfield

We live in a borough that has 2 major towns, with Welwyn Garden being regarded as more advantaged than Hatfield, in terms of facilities and amenities. This has always been a matter of concern to residents in both towns and is really not tenable in the longer term, both towns will loose out.

Would it not make sense to consider moving the borough's council offices to Hatfield to adjust the centre of gravity of the borough? This may reinforce the current welcome attempts to revitalise Hatfield town centre. Furthermore with all the Council's officers and elected representatives regularly meeting there it would have more attention and focus. Has such this vision for the borough been explored?

I would suggest that the funds released from the disposal of the current Council Office together with the £5m for the proposed extension would provide a more than appropriate modern office facility for the Council in Hatfield and provide some confidence and additional aspiration to that town.

As for Welwyn Garden, it could then consider how best to develop the north end of the town centre in that character of the Garden City along with better integrating the proposed Campus West developments.

### 4) Governance

I think it fair to say that there is a public feeling in the borough that there is a lack of open government from among some of our elected representatives. Decisions appear to be made by small groups without consultation and debate. Indeed debate discouraged with others. However I was encouraged by the recent opportunity to personally attend a good event where plans for the north end of the town centre were explored. More of this please.

But typically if we take this year's big capital spend project the £0.5m spend at Stanborough Lakes which has been closed all summer having set great visual expectations among families in our community there is clearly a lack of transparency or secrecy as to what's going on here. We do not know! We cannot afford to have this approach with this proposed development, some of us have been around long enough to recall the oceans of money our council lost on the Howardsgate debacle because of lack of open governance.

Can I ask that you scrutinize with vigor the options and business case for this proposal, including debating

the merits of the Hatfield option, as well as challenging the architectural design in the context of the conservation area in which it will reside.

I hope you will also continue to pursue a more open government approach and really understand what we are getting for our money - is it best value and is it in keeping with the community and environment we have chosen to live within, and indeed contribute and pay towards?

Thank you.

John Hughes  
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Welwyn Garden City  
AL8 6LE

PS Although I am on the board of the Welwyn Garden City Town Centre Partnership I am writing in a purely personal capacity and these views should not be attributed to the partnership.