

Broadwater Gardens - assessment of proposed development

Whilst I do believe that the proposed development is now of a much higher architectural design , with good landscaping and open spaces it would seem that this is largely on the basis of the input from the planning team at Welwyn Hatfield Council, who should be congratulated on taking what would have been a totally unacceptable 15 storey development of 340 units and a car parking ratio of 0.44 into something that can be debated; whether it should be approved as submitted is highly questionable for the reasons set out below .

Having read all the documents, and participated in the webinar , it is very disappointing that some of the issues raised by in the letter of 19 November from the Planners , have not been adequately addressed, namely parking , transport adequacy / connectivity east to west , the height of the development at 9 storeys , noise , housing mix and the amount of social housing / social rent . On balance, whilst I believe that the proposals are better than the existing BioPark offices I believe that the negative issues outweigh the positives and as such should be refused, unless the issues raised in more detail below can be overcome.

Parking /Transport

Parking spaces

It is proposed that there will be 219 parking spaces serving the apartments which includes 22 visitor spaces viz 197 spaces to service the apartment; this is a ratio of 0.65 rather than the figure quoted of 0.76. As such this does not exceed the level of The Wheat Quarter and simply mirrors it and in my opinion is unacceptable.

To cope with the shortfall it is proposed that parking permits will be allocated on a first come first serve basis, meaning that residents with a car without a permit will end parking in nearby streets (where there are currently real issues or using the visitor parking bays. Neither option of which is realistic nor is the option to ban residents from seeking on street permits in neighbouring roads.

The shortfall seems to be based on the premises that the Council want to see car free developments, the parking ratios agreed for the Wheat development for Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing and the results of the 2011 Census .

- It is difficult to accept that car free developments can occur in places such as Welwyn Garden City when so many activities require car transport, this is not London where there is a huge transport infrastructure. It would be far better to accept that car ownership will continue to be the norm for a large majority of the population but accept that these will be hybrid or electric vehicles and plan accordingly , and which would still meet the Councils climate change objectives
- Having attended the meeting when the Wheat Quarter received permission there was a debate regarding the parking provision and a number of councillors were not happy at such a low level but the redevelopment received approval on the basis of the whole Scheme and its contribution to Welwyn Garden City as a whole.
- The 2011 Census has been used on many occasions to justify car parking provision in WGC , citing the car ownership of flats at 0.64 but these are 2011 figures and represent an area where until recently there have been few private developments of a large scale . In spite of the huge amount of detailed information provided with the application it is disappointing that a more up to date survey was not undertaken to justify the car parking provision. I have to assume that the reason would be that car ownership figures have changed upwards. Indeed , it is clear from the survey undertaken this year at the adjacent Mirage development that car ownership is 1.38 ,

which is double the figure quoted from the 2011 Census . Trying to justify parking provision based on the Census is clearly unjustifiable and needs to be rethought.

- Parking provision at most of the nearby planned developments evidence 1 parking space per apartment and these are equally in sustainable locations ie 29 Broadwater Road and 37 Broadwater Road. If you look at the latest completed developments in Broadwater Road, being the adjacent Griffin Place and the Mercury House redevelopment, every apartment is allocated 1 car parking space and these are full at night which shows there is at least a need for 1 to 1 car parking spaces.
- That same 2011 Census shows that 56% of people use a car for work whilst only 11% use a train and 3.7 % use a bus. Whilst train services may have improved since the Census it is debatable whether the bus service has
- Being a resident at the Times Square development in Bessemer Road actual evidence shows that even with 1 parking space per apartment, there is a massive under provision of spaces for residents and visitors, it is clear that when there is a large number of 2 bedroom apartments (44% on Broadwater Gardens) there is requirement for 2 spaces per apartment and this is equally clear for 3 bedroom apartments. The results of limiting the sales of flats with spaces will undoubtedly cause overspill in neighbouring developments and streets and is not in my opinion any way to manage car parking.
- Research from local estate agents shows that 95% of people renting flats require a car parking space and this is a key requirement for almost every development

Poor connectivity east to west

- The letter of 19 November 2020 from Planning says that the capacity of the existing infrastructure, particularly the train line and bus services and how residents will travel east to west, needs to be addressed. Apart from references to train and bus service timetables and references to a potential Bus Rapid Transport Network east to west fast service , the requirement of how people will travel east to west has not been addressed However basic research shows that there is only one bus per hour travelling in the Hertford /Harlow direction being the 724 service ,hardly the type of service that provides a flexible solution
- Information taken from the Inspectors reports describes the situation on inward commuting
 - “ 86% of inward commuters travelled to work by car in 2011. The evidence before the examination suggests that parts of the A1M and the A1000, the main north south road links, and the A414, which provides east-west links to Hertford, St Albans and beyond, are already heavily congested at peak periods. There are no guarantees that necessary road improvements, to facilitate the free flow of traffic along these routes, will be implemented in a timely manner during the plan period. In such circumstances an overall strategy that led to an increase in net incommuting would not be sustainable and should not be found sound”
- The East West connectivity of course less of an issue if the potential residents of Broadwater Gardens travel to London to work and use the train service. During the webinar questions were raised regarding the current location of potential resident, the answer was that it was accepted that due to Covid that many people were currently looking to relocate from London and this trend was expected to continue. Research published from local estate agents suggests that between 40% to 50% of buyers in Welwyn Garden City are not from the area and therefore it is likely that the vast majority of buyers will not be local to Welwyn Garden City which will also be affected by the potential sales values of the properties and the ability of potential owners to

raise the required mortgage as the figures quoted by Lambert Smith Hampton seem unrealistic to current sales prices in the area.

Capacity of existing transport

- Apart from references to train and bus service timetables there is no information on the existing transport network. However, before Covid, it was clear that the existing train service from and calling at WGC was under extreme pressure at peak times

Height of buildings

- It is good to see that the height of the buildings have been reduced from 15 storeys to 9 storeys and the massing has been improved; this is clearly an improvement on the current Bio Park development. However, 9 storeys is still high for Welwyn Garden City and citing the badly thought out Wheat Quarter development as a precedent is not a sufficient reason in my opinion. And it seems that the only reason why the height has been reduced is down to the influence of the Planners through the pre-application process and workshops. It is worth pointing out that the Planners stated in their correspondence of 19 November that the maximum height of 9 storeys is too tall and overbearing and needed robust justification.

Noise

- The development will clearly be affected from noise from the closeness to the railway and the Pall Mall owned warehouse site. The documents lay out the noise mitigation measures but it is clear that being so close to the trailer park serving the warehouse, residents at ground floor level could be subject to noise on a 24 hour basis, even if this is mitigated by the proposed acoustic fence. It is, therefore, disappointing that the developers could not reach an agreement with the warehouse owners to purchase this piece of land to enable the land to be effectively incorporated into the development. Is this a situation where the Council needs to intervene?
- I would hope that the Planners would seek an independent review of the noise reports and mitigation measures proposed, as has happened recently on other planning applications. This review would hopefully prevent the type of noise related issues that are occurring at the nearby Times Square development from the adjacent Grace Foods facility where deliveries and the chillers are affecting residents inside their properties throughout the day. It is also worth noting that other respondents are suggesting noise issues, even when double glazing is in place.

Housing mix

- The Strategic Housing Market Assessment Update 2017 (SHMAU) identifies implied size of housing required between 2013-2032 as follows: · 1 bed – 13% · 2 bed – 22% · 3 bed – 41% · 4+ beds – 23%. This modelling exercise provides an illustrative interpretation of available historic evidence to estimate the size of housing which may be required in Welwyn Hatfield over the plan period. The documentation submitted OAN Paper (June 2019) indicates a slight change to these figures with 1 bed at 11%, 2 bed at 26%, 3 bed at 41% and 4 bed at 20%. This extrapolates to the requirement of 77% of houses and 23% being flats. However, the Broadwater Gardens mix is 44% 1 bed, 44% 2 bed, 9% 3 bed and 3% being 4 bed town houses. Whilst helping to meet the requirements of the number of dwellings for the Councils local plan it does little to meet the need for houses in the area.

- The Council have recently published its Annual Monitoring Report 2019/20 Covering 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020 and the following information is pertinent regarding housing mix and requirements which suggest that this development will do little to contribute to the Councils housing mix requirement
 - “Completions in 2019/20 were overwhelmingly flats and studio apartments. Just over one third of completions were two bedroom flats (36%), while a similar proportion (35%) were one bedroom studios. Three bedroom houses made up just 2% of gross completions
 - Completions of one and two bed properties are well above the identified requirement, while medium and larger properties are somewhat below”
- The letter from Lambert Smith Hampton of 17 December talks about the existing demographics of Peartree and that there is an undersupply of 2 bedroom apartments taking into consideration the number of sales in the area. However this fails to take into consideration the number of apartments already granted planning permission such as 29 Broadwater Road, 37 Broadwater Road, The Shredded Wheat Site, and Accord House, all of which have planning permission.
- There is also a statement that 64% of buyers in the area using the Help to Buy Scheme were flat buyers, which Lambert Smith says demonstrates the need for flats. What of course this does not take into account is that the majority of new homes completed in the area in the last 12 months were flats and all developments in Broadwater Road were apartments

Social Housing

- It can be understood that developing on a brownfield site is more expensive than a greenfield vacant site, and it is documented that the proposed development cannot viably support affordable housing, but the figures have not been published. It has to be hoped that the figures do not use the Lambert Smith Hampton sales figure of £300K as a justification as clearly this figure is hopelessly wrong.
- It is interesting to see that a sales figure of £300k is quoted for affordability, requiring a salary of £46800, when in reality new build 1 bedroom apartments sell in the area between £240k to £300K whilst new 2 bedroom apartments sell for between £300k to £340K and 3 bedroom apartments up to £395K. As such will these apartments be available for residents living locally or will they in reality just be aimed at people looking to relocate out of London but still work in London?
- A figure of 10% affordable housing is ridiculous on a development of this size , the majority being shared ownership (of which there is a limited market due to the number being built at the nearby Times Square development and the number under construction at adjacent sites on the Wheat Quarter and 29 Broadwater Road) . What is required is more affordable rent properties to tackle the social housing waiting list of which they are proposing to provide just 9. It is stated that they have yet to agree a Housing Association but it may well be that the service charges on this development will be at a level that’s makes it uneconomic for a social housing association to be involved as happening recently at Accord House, which will now become a totally private development . I am sure that the Councils housing team will look carefully at the numbers to ensure an appropriate level of contribution is made, whether it be more social rent apartments or a cash contribution , as there is a chronic need for more affordable housing

- It is also interesting to see that the private ownership apartments “will be open plan to maximise the sense of space “ whilst affordable rent flats “ have a more traditional layout “ is this not discrimination against rented flats that will be designed in a different way