

East Herts Council Report

Executive

Date of meeting: Tuesday 5 September 2023

Report by: Councillor Vicky Glover-Ward – Executive Member for Planning and Growth

Report title: Birchall Garden Suburb Masterplan

Ward(s) affected: Hertford Rural;

Summary – To enable Executive Members to consider the Masterplan document for Birchall Garden Suburb; site allocation Policy EWEL1 Land East of Welwyn Garden City.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR Executive to recommend to Council that:

- a) **The Birchall Garden Suburb Masterplan for the strategic allocation known as EWEL1 Land East of Welwyn Garden City, as detailed in Appendix A, be agreed as a material consideration for Development Management purposes.**

1.0 Proposal(s)

- 1.1 In accordance with District Plan Policies DES1 and EWEL1, a Masterplan document has been produced for Land East of Welwyn Garden City, known as Birchall Garden Suburb, as a collaborative process including engagement with the Steering Group.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 The District Plan was adopted in October 2018 and sets out the Council's strategy for delivering growth in East Herts over the Plan period up to 2033.
- 2.2 The East Herts Approach to masterplanning was first presented to the District Planning Executive Panel in September 2017 (and was subsequently agreed by Council on the 18th October 2017). The report set out a series of steps that describe the various stages involved and processes expected for all 'significant' development sites. Whilst not a one-size-fits-all approach, the process is based upon a collaborative approach to identifying and resolving issues, creating a vision for what the site aspires to achieve, testing design options and consulting upon preferred solutions. The output of this process is a masterplanning framework or masterplan which is presented to members for consideration.
- 2.3 In order to embed the masterplanning process, District Plan Policy DES1: Masterplanning requires all 'significant' development proposals to prepare a masterplan. The significance of development is measured not only on its scale, but on the potential impact on the community and local character. However, paragraph 17.4.1 of the District Plan supporting text suggests that generally a threshold of fifty dwellings or more will apply.
- 2.4 The masterplan should set out the quantum and distribution of land uses; access; sustainable high-quality design and layout principles; necessary infrastructure; the relationship between the site and other adjacent and nearby land uses; landscape

and heritage assets and other relevant matters. Furthermore, the masterplan should be collaboratively prepared and informed by public participation. Finally, Policy DES1 states that to ensure sites are planned and delivered comprehensively, any application for development on part of the site will be assessed against its contribution to the masterplan as a whole.

- 2.5 The masterplanning document should therefore provide sufficient information to inform the preparation of detailed aspects of the site at the planning application stage. The level of detail required for the masterplanning document will depend upon the likely form of delivery of the site. For example, where delivery is expected by one party who has been involved throughout the Plan-making stages, a masterplanning document may be prepared, which provides key parameters and aspirations which form the basis of detailed design determined through a planning application process at a later stage.
- 2.6 Steering Groups have been established for masterplanning in the District to help inform the development of strategic sites allocated in the adopted District Plan. These are comprised of East Herts councillors, town and parish councillors, representatives of the local community and other interested groups, where appropriate. The Steering Group is a sounding board for key issues and, depending upon specific circumstances, for discussing detailed design elements whilst preparing the planning application through to when construction is underway. The Birchall Garden Suburb Steering Group was established in October 2022 and has been used to progress the masterplan document. The Birchall Garden

Suburb Steering Group is a joint Steering Group that is comprised of representatives from both East Herts and Welwyn Hatfield.

3.0 Reason(s)

- 3.1 The masterplanning process is based upon a collaborative approach to identifying and resolving issues, creating a vision for what the site aspires to achieve, testing design options and preferred solutions. The output of this process is a masterplanning framework which is presented to members for consideration.

Policy Context:

- 3.2 Birchall Garden Suburb is an extension to Welwyn Garden City straddling the boundary between Welwyn Hatfield and East Hertfordshire. Policy EWEL1 in the adopted East Herts District Plan (2018) and Policy SP19 of the emerging Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan (2016) set out the strategy for the coordinated development of Birchall Garden Suburb via the production of a joint masterplan.
- 3.3 Policy EWEL1 and SP19 requires the joint masterplan to be prepared by East Herts District Council and Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council, working with the landowner and other key stakeholders. The usual route for this is for masterplanning and pre-app advice to commence prior to submission of a planning application. However, in this case the landowner took a different approach and in June 2022 submitted an outline planning application prior to undertaking masterplanning and pre-app. In light of this approach the councils took the decision to lead on the masterplanning process. As such Allies and Morrison were appointed jointly by the councils to undertake and formulate a masterplan for Birchall Garden Suburb.
- 3.4 Allies and Morrison is an architecture and urban planning practice who have been involved with the Birchall Garden

Suburb site for a number of years, originally appointed in 2019 to prepare a masterplan for the provision of approximately 2,500 dwellings. This was paused during the ongoing Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan examination in public, but was resumed in 2022 to respond to the smaller site area providing for 1,950 dwellings with reflects the Inspector's recommendations on the draft Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan.

The Masterplan:

- 3.5 The role of the masterplan is to provide a long-term strategy and development framework which responds to the local and wider issues and needs. The masterplan is not designed to be a prescriptive blueprint, but to provide clear guidance on the priorities and principles for the new neighbourhoods that can inform the subsequent planning application/s for the site.
- 3.6 The Birchall Garden Suburb Masterplan, which can be found at Appendix A, is a comprehensive document which, across four Chapters covers the following:
 1. *Introduction* (pages 5-20) – an overview of the site, the purpose of the masterplan and the policy and Garden City context.
 2. *Site analysis* (pages 21-61) – inclusive of site location, current and previous land uses, existing amenities and heritage assets, ecological, landscape – constraints and opportunities.
 3. *Design Approach and Development Objectives* (pages 63-75) – overarching vision and approach, key themes and principles, land use, movement, placemaking, green infrastructure and sustainability.
 4. *Masterplan* (pages 77-145) – strategies for land use, movement, placemaking, green infrastructure and sustainability. The overall masterplan and approach to each neighbourhood.
- 3.7 The design approach and development objectives chapter sets-out nine principles which combine the original Garden City

Principles and the TCPAs Garden Community Principles to reflect the desired approach at Birchall Garden Suburb. From those principles, five key themes have then been identified to underpin the masterplan framework itself. These are:

Land Use: A well functioning place

- Safe and secure places
- Supporting businesses and communities
- Vibrant and diverse communities

Movement: An integrated place

- Legible, permeable and well connected streets
- Walkable and cycle-friendly neighbourhoods
- Safe and characterful streets

Placemaking: An attractive and diverse place

- Responding to character and context
- Resilient and distinctive design
- A varied mix of typologies and tenures

Landscape and Green Infrastructure: A landscape led approach

- Integrated with the landscape
- Spaces for nature
- High quality public space and landscaping

Sustainability: A resilient place

- Sustainable design and construction
- Integrated with the landscape
- Reducing all forms of consumption

3.8 The Masterplan itself builds on these key themes and the final chapter addresses those themes section-by-section. These sections include 'key characteristics and guidance' which are intended to guide future detailed masterplanning and planning applications and ensure that the themes are maintained as proposals develop.

Engagement:

- 3.9 Engagement in a masterplanning process provides the best opportunity to ensure a collaborative approach aiming to achieve the most successful design for the development and to help influence the design of the scheme that will inevitably be submitted as a planning application.
- 3.10 Throughout the masterplan process a number of meetings have taken place with officers and key stakeholders. As well as this, the Steering Group have met on four occasions to debate and discuss the development of the Masterplan. The Birchall Garden Suburb Steering Group is made up of the following members:
- Officers from East Herts District Council, Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council and Hertfordshire County Council;
 - Councillors from East Herts District Council and Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council
 - Hertingfordbury and Essendon Parish Councils
 - Landowner representatives
 - Friends of Panshanger Park
- 3.11 Pages 10-11 of the Masterplan detail and timeline where stakeholder engagement has taken place alongside the drafting of the Masterplan. It also details further stakeholder interviews that were undertaken outside of the Steering Group meetings, including with Hertingfordbury Parish Council, the Gardens Trust and the Green Corridor Group. Alongside the key issues raised by the Steering Group, the issues raised through these stakeholder interviews have been incorporated into the final Masterplan.
- 3.12 On 20 January 2023 the LPAs engaged with the Hertfordshire Design Review Panel to review the draft Masterplan. The draft Masterplan was generally positively received, with the panel

making suggestions and a number of comments on areas for improvement. Those areas included; encouragement to emphasise the differences between the three neighbourhoods and improving and enhancing connectivity across and into the new and existing neighbourhoods.

3.13 Discussion with the Steering Group at the final meeting in March regarding next steps, led to feedback suggesting that the public and local residents would benefit from receiving further information on the masterplan and be able to ask questions about the masterplan. The LPAs therefore hosted a number of engagement events in locations in Welwyn Garden City and East Herts in July and August 2023. The Welwyn events were very well attended across two separate afternoon/evening events, a similar event in East Herts took place on the 17th August. The main points raised during the events relate to:

- Impact of development on traffic and congestion, particularly on Black Fan Road/B195.
- Access to services and new infrastructure provision. In particular the provision of healthcare facilities, schools and water infrastructure.
- Location and necessity of Gypsy and Traveller sites
- Compatibility of heavy industry and employment uses alongside the new community.
- Drainage, contamination and landfill questions.

3.14 The above is not an exhaustive list, however a number of the key points raised are addressed in the final Masterplan. Some of the issues raised are likely to be addressed at the planning application stage or relate to detailed design or S106 matters.

Conclusion:

3.15 With the adopted District Plan in place, it is important that the Council can demonstrate the delivery of its strategic sites. It is therefore important that, while maintaining flexibility, the

Masterplanning Framework should provide sufficient breadth of information to guide both future developers and, importantly, decision-makers. An agreed Masterplan will be a material consideration in the decision-making process and is key to ensuring that proposals meet the Council's aspirations.

- 3.16 It is the view of Officers that this Masterplan provides a strong vision supported by clear objectives and the necessary balance of detail and flexibility to guide development proposals towards achieving those objectives. Officers will continue to work with Tarmac the landowners, alongside other stakeholders to ensure that the best possible design quality is achieved on this site.
- 3.17 It is therefore recommended that the Masterplan, as detailed at Appendix A, be agreed as a material consideration for Development Management purposes.

4.0 Options

- 4.1 The Council could choose not to approve the Masterplan. However this would be contrary to District Plan Policy DES1. It would also mean that when determining the application, the Council would not be able to take account of the design framework prepared in collaboration with the steering group and stakeholders. This is likely to have a detrimental impact on design quality and community engagement.

5.0 Risks

- 5.1 If the scheme progresses to the planning application stage without a masterplan, it will be contrary to the District Plan.

6.0 Implications/Consultations

- 6.1 The masterplanning process includes public engagement and steering group meetings with members and local representatives. This is explained above in more detail.

Community Safety

No

Data Protection

No

Equalities

No

Environmental Sustainability

The Masterplan incorporates design principles that address environmental sustainability

Financial

No

Health and Safety

No

Human Resources

No

Human Rights

No

Legal

No

Specific Wards

Hertford Rural

7.0 Background papers, appendices and other relevant material

7.1 Appendix A: Birchall Garden Suburb Masterplan

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