

East Herts Council Report

Executive pre-meeting

Date of meeting: Tuesday 14 November 2023

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

Report title: Land at Walkern Road (WAS3) Masterplanning Framework

Ward(s) affected: Watton-at-Stone;

Summary – To enable Executive Members to consider the Masterplan Framework Document for Land at Walkern Road; site allocation Policy WAS3 in the Watton-at-Stone Neighbourhood Plan.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR Executive to recommend to Council that:

- a) **The Land at Walkern Road Masterplan Framework Document, for the Watton-at-Stone Neighbourhood Plan site allocation known as WAS3, as detailed in Appendix A to this report, be agreed as a material consideration for Development Management purposes.**

1.0 Proposal(s)

- 1.1 In accordance with District Plan Policy DES1, a masterplan framework has been produced for the Neighbourhood Plan site allocation known as Land at Walkern Road (WAS3), in collaboration with the Shaping Watton-at-Stone 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. As part of this growth strategy, Policy VILL1 Group 1 Villages, requires the eight largest and most sustainable villages in the district to accommodate at least a 10% increase in housing stock between 2017 and 2033. In Watton-at-Stone this amounts to at least 92 dwellings. The policy accepts there may be a need for a change to the Green Belt boundary, to accommodate growth. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) confirms that where a need for changes to Green Belt boundaries has been established through strategic policies, detailed amendments to those boundaries may be made through neighbourhood plans.
- 2.2 The East Herts Approach to Masterplanning was first presented to the District Planning Executive Panel in September 2017 (and agreed by Council on the 18 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.
- 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 in order 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 in the district to help inform the development of strategic sites allocated in the adopted District Plan and other significant sites that come

forward for development. 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.

2.7 At 60 dwellings, land at Walkern Road (WAS3) is the first site to undertake the masterplanning process in Watton-at-Stone. In addition, it is the first neighbourhood plan allocation in East Herts to meet the District Plan threshold for producing a masterplan document. Over the last eight years, Watton-at-Stone Parish Council have worked collaboratively with the local community, to develop a neighbourhood plan, which includes the strategic site allocation WAS3. There is strong vision and aspiration for the site locally, which has informed the scope and the direction of this masterplanning process.

2.8 The Shaping Watton-at-Stone Steering Group was established in July 2023 and has been used to progress the Masterplan Framework Document.

3.0 Reason(s)

3.1 This masterplanning process is based upon a collaborative approach, which is shaped by the local context. The output is this masterplanning document which is presented to members for consideration at Appendix A.

Policy context

- 3.2 The Watton-at-Stone Neighbourhood Area was designated on the 5 April 2016. Subsequently, the Parish Council has developed the Watton-at-Stone Neighbourhood Plan, informed by early community engagement between 2016 and 2020 and two statutory public consultations in 2022.
- 3.3 Following an examination by an Independent Examiner, the Watton-at-Stone Neighbourhood Plan was subject to a local referendum on 12 October 2023. In total, 95% (609) of voters were in favour of the Neighbourhood Plan being used to help decide planning applications in the Neighbourhood Area. As outlined within Paragraph 38A(4)(a) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, (as amended by the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017) this means the referendum was successful because more than half of those voting in the referendum voted in favour of the plan. Therefore, Watton-at-Stone Neighbourhood Plan now forms part of the development plan and any planning applications within the Neighbourhood Area will be assessed using the plan alongside the East Herts District Plan (2018), the mineral and waste plans and all other material considerations.
- 3.4 There are only narrow circumstances when a Council does not make (adopt) a neighbourhood plan, when it is in breach or incompatible with any EU or human rights obligations. However, the Watton-at-Stone Neighbourhood Plan does not breach these aforementioned obligations. Therefore, it is anticipated that the Plan will be adopted at the Council meeting on 13th December 2023.

Neighbourhood Plan site allocation

- 3.5 In accordance with the District Plan, the opportunity was taken during the preparation of the Watton-at-Stone Neighbourhood Plan to exceed the required 10% growth in return for significant community benefits, including a circular walk for the village, new football pitches and a wetland meadow. The Neighbourhood Plan development strategy (Policy WAS1) proposes 144 homes in the plan period, including two strategic sites on the edge of the village, that require changes to the Green Belt boundary. One of these strategic sites, WAS3; Site Allocation at Walkern Road, is the focus of this Masterplan Document, as detailed in Appendix A.
- 3.6 Policy WAS3 sets out criteria to guide the development of 60 dwellings on the site, with particular focus on connectivity to the village and wider countryside, high quality design, provision of open space, protection of views and delivery of a bridge over the River Beane as part of a village circular path. The allocation includes public amenity green space, which will remain within the Green Belt, to provide a buffer between the housing development and the River Beane (an important chalk stream) and enable pedestrian and cycle access to the river and delivery of the new bridge. In addition, policy WAS6 requires development proposals to be assessed against the neighbourhood plan design code. The design code is based on the principles of good design and is not overly prescriptive, but it does include details relating to layout and design that need to be considered by the masterplan document.

Masterplan Framework Document

- 3.7 The Masterplan Framework Document has been developed collaboratively. Building on the relationship Watton-at-Stone

Parish Council developed with Fairview Homes during the development of the Neighbourhood Plan over a number of years, the steering group has worked with Fairview over the last three months to ensure that the masterplan will create a high-quality and landscape led scheme that relates well to adjoining development, the River Beane and the wider village. To help facilitate the delivery of the circular path (a key vision in the Neighbourhood Plan) the site boundary identified in the masterplan extends south of the allocated green space area, to include the field known as Rush Meads. Within Fairview's ownership, it is south of the river and north of the High Street. It will remain in the Green Belt and is also identified in the masterplan as an area for biodiversity net gain to improve the ecological value of the land adjacent to the River Beane.

- 3.8 The design framework for the site responds to the policy requirements in both the District Plan and Watton-at-Stone Neighbourhood Plan; and seeks to deliver the aspirations of the local community and some of the identified community benefits. The design parameters established are as a result of this policy context and local engagement, alongside an analysis of constraints and opportunities and discussions with East Herts Council's officers, the Shaping Watton-at-Stone Steering Group and other stakeholders.
- 3.9 The Masterplan Framework Document, as presented in **Appendix A**, sets out a vision for the site supported by a series of principles to deliver 60 homes alongside landscaping and amenity space to provide an attractive landscape-led development on the northern edge of the village. The development will promote high quality, sustainable, low carbon

development, incorporating 40% affordable housing and a mix of new dwellings. Walking and cycling connectivity to the village centre and the surrounding countryside is a key objective, including improvements to pedestrian access along Walkern Road. A new pedestrian and cycle path across the site is a key principle, connecting green infrastructure to the east with the central open space and green infrastructure to the south-west. Proposals include provision of a new bridge over the River Beane, providing a future connection to the adjacent housing allocation site WAS4 and the village circular walk identified in the Neighbourhood Plan.

3.10 Other key design principles within the site include; provision of open space (including an amenity area to the east, with play provision and a more natural area for biodiversity net gain to the south-west); sustainable drainage (SuDs); visual and landscape corridors creating a rural character with strong links to the surrounding countryside and the River Beane; the use of gardens and landscaping to separate the new built form from existing properties to the south; the identification of active frontages in the built form to ensure public space is overlooked and new landscaping to create defensible new Green Belt boundaries as appropriate. Biodiversity improvements are proposed to the land south of the developable area to preserve and enhance the ecology of the Beane Valley.

3.11 In addition to on-site delivery, the proposal will contribute towards other local provision through S.106 agreement/s in due course as part of the planning application process.

Engagement

3.12 Engagement provides the best opportunity to ensure a collaborative approach aiming to achieve the most successful design for the development. The development of the Watton-at-Stone Neighbourhood Plan over recent years has meant that stakeholders and the community have been significantly involved in shaping the vision and design of this site. Pages 8 and 9 of the Masterplan detail and timeline this engagement, including five consultations and also specific engagement with key stakeholders. Some of the key points raised by the community include:

- Concern about the traffic impact on Walkern Road and the need for improved pedestrian access.
- Importance of development being designed in character with the rest of the village.
- Preference for a maximum of 2 storeys.
- Need for sustainable development and energy efficient dwellings.
- Integration of green space within the site and need to ensure the built form is set back from the road
- Concern about impact on existing properties to the south.

3.13 The final Masterplan addresses these issues, although those relating to more detailed design or S106 matters will be addressed at the planning application stage.

3.14 Throughout the neighbourhood planning and masterplanning process, stakeholders have advised on a number of key site issues including transport, ecology, archaeology, flooding, design and the new green belt boundaries. Fairview have had numerous meetings with Watton-at-Stone Parish Council to deliver the vision and aspirations for the site in the

Neighbourhood Plan. They have also liaised directly with other relevant stakeholders on a number of issues such as access, pedestrian improvements, layout and the design of the bridge over the River Beane. As part of the masterplan process there has also been on-going engagement between officers and Fairview Homes.

3.15 Building on this engagement, two meetings with the Shaping Watton-at-Stone Steering Group have taken place to discuss the development of the masterplan and for the open debate of issues. It was agreed with Watton-at-Stone Parish Council that given the extensive work already undertaken via the Neighbourhood Plan, that this would be an appropriate programme of Steering Group meetings. The steering group comprises of Watton-at-Stone Parish Council, members of the Neighbourhood Plan group, district councillors and officers from East Herts Council and Hertfordshire County Council. Suggestions relating to both the content and presentation of the masterplan have influenced the scope and detail of the document. Discussions about detailed design and s106 will be addressed at the planning applications stage.

3.16 The developers engaged with the Hertfordshire Design Review Panel on 5 October 2023. The draft Masterplan Framework Document was positively received in many areas, with the panel making suggestions and a number of comments on potential improvements. These included; the need for more analysis and context in relation to SuDs, local street patterns and noise from the A602; the importance of incorporating connected streets and making strong pedestrian and cycle connections beyond the site; the need for structural

landscaping and architectural design to help mitigate any impact on the protected view; and encouragement to emphasise sustainability and climate change resilience. Many of these issues will require further thought at the planning application stage, when the detailed design is being considered.

Conclusion

3.17 With the adopted District Plan in place, it is important that the Council can demonstrate delivery of its housing strategy, including sites allocated in Neighbourhood Plans. 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 Framework Document will be a material consideration in the decision-making process and is key to ensuring that any planning application should meet the Council's aspirations.

3.18 It is the view of Officers that this Masterplan Framework Document provides a good basis upon which to move forward to preparing a detailed application. It provides a suitable framework for the main issues of significance in relation to the proposal, whilst providing enough flexibility that further detail can be agreed at appropriate stages as application proposals are worked up, as necessary. Officers will continue to work with Fairview and other stakeholders to ensure that the best possible quality design is achieved on this site.

3.19 It is therefore recommended that the Masterplan Framework Document, 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 Framework Document. 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 agreed in collaboration with the steering group. 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 Neighbourhood Plan has been subject to multiple rounds of public engagement and the masterplanning process includes steering group meetings with Members and local representatives. This is explained above in more detail.

Community Safety

The Masterplan Framework Document includes provision for the built form to overlook public spaces, helping to promote safer spaces.

Data Protection

No

Equalities

No

Environmental Sustainability

The Masterplan Framework Document incorporates design principles that address environmental sustainability.

Financial

No

Health and Safety

No

Human Resources

No

Human Rights

No

Legal

No

Specific Wards

Watton-at-Stone

7.0 Background papers, appendices and other relevant material

7.1 Appendix A: Land at Walkern Road Masterplan Framework Document

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