

North Herts District Council Local Plan–Timeline for Response to Council’s Request for Strategic Housing Land

Land to the North of the Grange, Letchworth Garden City

Introduction

As part of central government planning policy, each local authority is required to make suitable provision for housing, including a longer term strategy and a 5 year supply of land.

The National Planning Policy Framework, which is the government’s main planning policy document, sets out the criteria that should be used to determine how much land should be allocated, in order to meet housing need.

North Herts District Council’s Local Plan dates back to 1996, which means that the Council is required to update its policies and ensure that sufficient housing land supply is provided.

In 2008, North Herts District Council published their initial thoughts on how much housing should be provided and where, in order to meet regional requirements set out in the East of England Plan. In 2009 a consultation document was published indicating the options where this housing could be provided. This included 6,200 new homes in North Hertfordshire from 2001 to 2021. This did not include the land to the north of the Grange, but did include land to the west of Western Way and other sites in Letchworth of under 1,000 homes, known as non-strategic sites.

Following the abolition of the East of England Plan and the publication of the government’s National Planning Policy Framework in March 2012, it became apparent to the Council that they needed to revise the methodology used to calculate the number of homes required in their previous consultation plan.

A figure of 10,700 homes was subsequently agreed for North Hertfordshire in 2012 by the Council for the period between 2011 and 2031.

In order to meet this increased requirement, the Council had to consider further sites of 1,000 homes or more, known as strategic sites. This resulted in an approach made to landowners in November 2012 and the following actions set out below.

The programme for these actions is defined by the Council’s requirement to have a new Local Plan and the dates included in the NHDC Local Development Scheme, which is a standard document used by local authorities to set out timelines for various adopted planning policy documents.

2nd November 2012 - NHDC Call for Sites Letter

Following the decision by NHDC regarding the number of houses required, a letter was sent by NHDC to major landowners requesting confirmation of land

available for strategic sites for housing development. This required a response by 16th November 2012.

In response to this, the Heritage Foundation reviewed possible housing locations, should it be agreed that land should be provided in Letchworth to meet this requirement. Land that has previously been developed, known as brownfield land, was considered and it was felt that the potential re-development sites, such as at Birds Hill and Blackhorse Road, could be recommended to the Board for inclusion. No other suitable locations which could come forward in the Council's timescales and meet their site size requirements were found, which would not prejudice the viability of Letchworth's local economy.

A search for strategic sites on land that has not been previously developed, known as green field land, was then undertaken within the Council's time line, and it became apparent that there a number of constraints on possible locations.

Council Officers indicated that they would not be supportive of any possible land allocations which may co-join Letchworth with Baldock or Hitchin, which meant that possible strategic sites to the east and west of the town could not be considered. To the south of the town, there are constraints arising from existing uses and the planning of the 1970s and 1980s then green field developments of the Lordship and Manor park estates, which were carefully formulated to protect the identity of Willian.

This led to consideration of land to the north of the town and a possible linking to the area adjacent to Western Way, which was previously suggested by the Council in their earlier consultation document.

13th November 2012 – Board of Management meeting

Sites highlighted by the Council as non-strategic sites were re-considered and with the exception of Green Belt land at Croft Lane, support by the Heritage Foundation for these was confirmed.

The land to the north of the Grange was discussed and it was agreed that this could be considered for housing, but that the Heritage Foundation would review its position following the Council's statutory consultation exercise.

Letter sent 15th November 2012, confirming the Heritage Foundation's position.

February and March 2013 – North Herts District Council Consultation

NHDC's statutory consultation exercise on housing options across the District, which included the land to the north of the Grange, took place throughout February and March.

21st March 2013 – Governors' Meeting

At the Heritage Foundation's Governors' meeting, the latest position regarding the Local Plan and possible housing sites was explained to the Governors for information.

The Governors indicated that there is a need for more affordable housing and a range of homes that reflect the demographic of the town.

21st May 2013 – Garden City Meeting

At the Garden City meeting, there was a presentation on the possibility that the land to the north of the Grange may be developed, as part of a new NHDC Local Plan.

At this meeting, it was stated that this is a difficult decision for the Heritage Foundation as landowner and that we would need the help of the local community to decide whether we should allow the Council to consider this.

It was agreed at the meeting that a community engagement process would be undertaken, before the Heritage Foundation confirms its position as landowner to the decision making body, the NHDC.

July 2013 – NHDC Publish Additional Local Plan Background Papers

Papers published by NHDC on strategic transport and a landscape assessment.

August 2013 – NHDC Publish Council's consultation results

The results from the February and March consultation exercise undertaken by the Council was published by NHDC.

10th September 2013 – Board of Management meeting

The results of the statutory consultation was considered at this meeting.

The Board agreed that the position set out in November 2012 remains and further consideration of the land to the north of the Grange is necessary, the results of which will be reported to the December 2013 Board.

This was confirmed to NHDC by letter dated 25th September 2013.

12th November 2013 – Board of Management meeting

At this meeting the arrangements for the community engagement exercise, were discussed and agreed.

18th November – 29th November – Town Wide Dialogue

An exhibition was held at the Hub and facilitated by the University of Hertfordshire and its consultant team. To help inform the debate the following reports were also published:

- Socio Economics
- Flooding and Hydrology
- Transport
- Ecology

Each of the reports was made available at the Exhibition.

The Exhibition followed a mail drop to every address in Letchworth Garden City. It was also advertised using local and social media.

It included panels on: the process, background on Letchworth Garden City; Garden City principles; road and traffic; wildlife and the environment; flood risk, people; public, services and jobs; the land to the north of the Grange; the decision making process; our approach to new homes; and income reinvested back into the town.

In order to examine key issues raised during the Council's statutory consultation, there was also the following specialist sessions:

- 21st November – Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners – Socio Economics
- 25th November – Cascade – Biodiversity
- 27th November – Cascade – Flooding and Hydrology
- 28th November – Cottee Transport Planning – Transport

There were 673 visitors to the Exhibition and 157 comment cards filled out and returned. 97 email comments were received, 58 on line comments, 136 Facebook comments and 5 letters.

At the same an online market research exercise was undertaken, with 309 local residents involved in the quantitative research and 40 in the qualitative exercise.

Comments were also invited via social media, email, a dedicated web site and in writing.

Petitions were also presented on behalf of local residents, which was both signed by hand and via an online petition.

4th December 2013 – Governors' Meeting

The results of the Exhibition were presented by the University of Hertfordshire team and the market research company.

The exhibition material was also provided and representatives from the consultant team were available to deal with any queries.

A discussion facilitated by the University representative took place, which focussed on the compatibility of the possible development with Garden City principles.

The Governors voted 9 to 4 in favour of the proposition that the development of the land to the north of the Grange should be supported.

10th December 2013 – Board Meeting

Prior to the meeting, the Board received a summary of the community engagement process produced by the University of Hertfordshire, which captured the comments arising from the Exhibition and town wide dialogue, to assist them in their consideration of this matter.

Following this review, the Board was requested to determine its views on whether this land should be included as part of the Council's deliberations of possible sites to meet its housing requirements.

The Board unanimously agreed to put forward land North of the Grange for inclusion in the next stage of the Local Plan process and that the Heritage Foundation's position is confirmed to North Herts District Council, who will then use this information as part of its review of potential sites, prior to its publication of its draft Local Plan for consultation purposes, early in 2014.

The Chairman concluded that should the development of this site move forward the Trustees would ensure that it was delivered in a way that the town would be proud of, ensuring that the Garden City Principles are adhered to if the site should be allocated for development within NHDC's Local Plan.

This was confirmed to NHDC by letter dated 11th December 2013 and a press statement released. The Heritage Foundation's Chief Executive did a series of interviews with the local press and the decision was published online.

A member of the local group opposed to the development was contacted direct and this group was invited to meet the Chief Executive, to discuss the decision, but to date this has not been taken up.

The report by the University of Hertfordshire was subsequently published online, including a summary of the process and representations received, along with the notes from the Governors' meeting.

December 2014/January 2015 – North Herts District Council Consultation

The draft Local Plan, which includes a whole raft of policies covering a wide range of areas, including how the District's housing requirements should be met in the period 2011 to 2031, was the subject of a statutory public consultation exercise led by the Council, from 18th December 2014 to 6th February 2015.

This showed the provision of 14,200 dwellings in the period of 2011 to 2031 and does include a number of potential housing sites in Letchworth, including the land to the north of the Grange Estate.

October/November 2016 – Submission Plan Consultation

Following the previous consultation, the Council agreed a final Submission Plan, which was the subject of a formal consultation exercise.

This plan includes the full raft of strategic and development management policies, covering a wide range of topic areas such as housing, employment, town centres and retail, transport, design and natural and historic environment.

The plan was the subject of a public consultation exercise, which ended on 30th November 2016.

This plan can be viewed at: <http://www.north-herts.gov.uk/sites/northherts-cms/files/Proposed%20Submission%20Local%20Plan.pdf>

The Heritage Foundation made representations to this plan and in support of these comments background papers on local housing and an updated economic assessment were produced.

June 2017

Full Council approved the submission of the plan for examination on 11 April 2017, which was submitted to the Secretary of State in June.

All of the representations from this consultation were submitted in full for the Inspector's consideration

October 2017

An Inspector Simon Berkeley has been appointed by the Secretary of State, to preside over a Public Examination and then report on the soundness of the Plan.

He will consider written submissions already made and also verbal representations at the Examination, by groups and individuals previously been agreed by the Inspector, on the schedule of matters and issues he considers of relevance. This is in order to test the robustness of the Plan against relevant legislation and government advice.

He will then make his conclusions on the Plan, which will then dictate if it can move on to be adopted.

November 2017 to March 2018

During this time the Public Examination for the Local Plan took place in Letchworth. This provided the opportunity for local groups, residents and other stakeholders to put forward their thoughts in a discussion led by the government Inspector. This included sessions on Green Belt, housing requirements, countryside, access and highways, environment and specific town sessions, including Letchworth Garden City.

October 2018

The Heritage Foundation launched a Design Competition, 'Re-Imagining the Garden City'. This is an ideas competition partnering with the RIBA Competitions Team. This sought to generate ideas for modern Garden City living and place making, to help influence the debate around new development and settlements, as well as using land to the north of the Grange as a case study. This will help initial thoughts on an illustrative plan for this site, should it be confirmed by the Local Plan process.

October to December 2018

In October the Foundation commenced its community engagement, asking local people what they like about Letchworth and aspects they would change. This included an on-line area specific comments, as well as attendance at various events. There was also an event held in the Grange estate for local residents as the largest site for Letchworth in the Local Plan is LG1.

January to April 2019

North Herts District Council commenced its consultation on modifications on the Local Plan, following the Public Examination. <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/planning/planning-policy/local-plan/local-plan-examination/main-modifications-and-additional-work>

This retained the development sites in Letchworth, including LG1 (north of the Grange) and LG3 (East of Talbot Way), with some changes to the accompanying text. Amendments were included in line with the Foundation representations at the Public Examination, including the return of a requirement to meet Letchworth Garden City Design Principles and the inclusion a community housing models as an appropriate affordable housing provider.

April 2019

The Heritage Foundation launched an exhibition of the 4 short-listed entries for the 'Re-Imagining the Garden City' Design Competition. 95 RIBA practices entered and the 4 short-listed entries developed their ideas and provided presentation material. This included a public vote and the opportunity for local people to comment on the entries and choose a favourite.

This also facilitated an industry event, attended by property professionals, government officials, politicians and designers, where modern Garden City design was discussed and debated.

Information on the Design Competition can be found at www.letchworth.com/design-competition

May 2019

The Foundation launches its second stage community engagement. This is separate from the Council's statutory consultation and is seeking to work with the local community to help shape the design approach the development of sites LG1 and LG3, should they be included in the final adopted Local Plan.

More details of this consultation can be found at www.letchworth.com/consultation

Summer 2019

The community consultation included 2 events in the Grange Estate, 1 event near to the Talbot Way sites and a series of activities around the town. An online consultation and a special transport and ecology events held.

A separate Transport Survey is undertaken.

There was also an opportunity to comment in the shortlisted 4 entries from the Design Competition.

The results of the consultation were published later in the year and can also be seen at www.letchworth.com/consultation

June 2019

The winner of the competition, 'Eco Responsive Environments', was announced, with their 'Grange in the Hedges' scheme. This can also be seen at www.letchworth.com/design-competition

July 2019

An initial letter from the Local Plan Inspector was issued to North Herts District Council.

August 2019

A detailed response was issued by the Inspector to the Council.

November/December 2019

The Council issued a detailed response to the matters raised by the Inspector.

These various documents and letters can be seen as part of the Examination Documents at <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/planning/planning-policy/local-plan/local-plan-examination/examination-documents>

January 2020

The Inspector announces the re-opening of the Public Examination and a further consultation exercise, this was delayed as a result of the Covid pandemic.

October 2020

The North District Council Full Council meeting did not agree with a proposal to delay the plan in light of the government's household projections.

November 2020

The Public Examination re-opened in November.

This is considering the matters raised by the Inspector in January, with additional questions arising from changes to government household projections.

<https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/planning/planning-policy/local-plan/local-plan-examination/further-hearing-sessions-2020>

Representations were made by the Heritage Foundation in response to these matters:

<https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/sites/northherts-cms/files/9861%20Letchworth%20Garden%20City%20Heritage%20Fondation%20Matter%2021%20.pdf>

<https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/sites/northherts-cms/files/16698%20Letchworth%20Garden%20City%20Heritage%20Foundation%20Matter%2022%20%20.pdf>

January 2021

The inspector has requested that the Examination be re-opened on 1st and 2nd February to discuss Barkway and proposed modifications to policies to support master planning principles being applied. More information can be found at:

<https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/planning/planning-policy/local-plan/local-plan-examination/further-hearing-sessions-2021>

March 2021

The Inspector has confirmed that the Public Examination is now closed. We are expecting further written consultation on modifications to the Local Plan to be published by the Council shortly through their website, after which we understand that the Inspector will publish his findings on the soundness of the Plan.