



# **Landscape Statement**

**In Respect Of Green Belt**

## **Land off South Way, Hatfield**

**Report Prepared By B J BLAKE BA (Hons) Dip LA CMLI**


**For And On Behalf Of**

**Strutt & Parker**

**Purpose: To Assess the Potential for Development  
on the Site, Without Significant Impact on its  
Landscape Quality and Biodiversity, or on the Green Belt  
or other Local Plan Policy Designations**

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## **1. BACKGROUND**

### **1.1 Introduction**

1.1.1 JBA Consultancy Services Ltd have been instructed by Strutt and Parker to complete a landscape and Green Belt report to explore the potential for development of a site off South Way, Hatfield, Hertfordshire to examine the landscape factors of relevance to the application for the proposed development.

### **1.2 The Purpose of This Document and JBA's Scope of Works**

1.2.1 To assess the potential impact of residential and commercial development on the landscape quality, the Green Belt (amongst other designations) and comment on the biodiversity and wildlife site impacts.

1.2.2 This report has been prepared in response to the comments given with the Local Plan Update document published on the 15<sup>th</sup> October 2014, which follow a Stage 1 Green Belt Study, a Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA), a Phase 1 Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA), Economy Study, an Assessment of the Importance of the Historic Environment of Panshanger Airfield and a Landscape Capacity and Sensitivity Study.

1.2.3 Whilst it is acknowledged that these documents are crucial in assessing the potential suitability of sites for much needed residential, commercial and other development, it is perhaps only after more exhaustive studies on specific sites that the potential of mitigations from sensitive siting and design considerations can be explored in more detail, that might or might not be able to successfully integrate development into sites that hitherto were conceived as being too sensitive or contrary to policies – such as the Green Belt or that seek to prevent coalescence.

### **1.3 The Site**

1.3.1 The site is accessed by a farm track directly off, to its south, the South Way (A1001) link road, a road that connects (west to east) the two north – south trunk roads – the A1 with the A1000. This farm entrance is closed to the public by a padlocked gate, although a footpath exists adjacent to it. This is one of two such paths which traverse the proposed site from two main link points that demand crossing the busy South Way link road. These paths converge at the top of the site near to the edge of the currently proposed development limit (i.e. that assessed at the time of the drafting of the SHLAA & as shown on preliminary promotional drawings historically). This development back line is given at a point on the site that corresponds to the 110m contour line, some 15 metres uphill from the farm access point, which is near to the 95m contour, where this crosses South Way. This is important because the prominence of development, or indeed the lack of it, is commonly affected materially by the topographic features of a site.

1.3.2 Building on ridges can be highly obtrusive and have high magnitude effects on landscapes. Building in valleys can be correspondingly lower in magnitude of effect and is often much less obtrusive, especially where it is mitigated by vegetation or the relief, so long views are not interrupted and

skylines remain unaffected. This factor is important in assessing this site, which has a pronounced ridge line and valley formation.

- 1.3.3 Hatfield was first chronicled in Saxon times and Elizabeth I was confined here for three years before she became Queen in 1558. There has been a market in Hatfield since 1226 and street trading continued in Old Hatfield until the 19th century.
- 1.3.4 Hatfield expanded dramatically in the 1930s with the opening of the De Havilland aircraft factory and has held an unrivalled place in British aviation history for sixty years with some of our most famous aircraft made here. The wartime Mosquito, Britain's first jet airliner, the Comet, and the well-known Trident were all produced at Hatfield
- 1.3.5 As the aircraft industry expanded a new town was built to house the influx of workers. In 1977 it became part of British Aerospace, with Hatfield as the headquarters for commercial aircraft. In the mid-1980s there were 7500 people employed in aircraft and weapons production but by 1993, all production at Hatfield ended. The new Hatfield Business Park, part of the old aerospace site, has attracted a number of major companies and prospects for the town have greatly improved.
- 1.3.6 Hatfield today has established itself as a centre for new technology and higher education. The University of Hertfordshire is based here and has over 18,000 part and full time students and is the town's largest employer. The town's population has now risen to over 28,000, and the traffic-free town shopping centre still hosts an open air market on Wednesdays and Saturdays.
- 1.3.7 The proposed development site is located to the south of South Way and this is immediately south of South Hatfield separated only by the South Way link road. The site is predominantly rectangular narrowing a little at the western end where the site abuts the cemetery, which is in desperate need for expansion itself – as a capacity study has revealed. The proposed development site is separated from Welham Green by open land which is currently protected as a wildlife site, so would not in itself create coalescence.
- 1.3.8 The entire area of open land to the south of South Hatfield is however within lands designated as Green Belt. The potential for compromising the Green Belt by development proposals will be explored later - looking at the issue primarily in landscape terms.
- 1.3.9 The site comprises two large open pasture fields that slope markedly to the north, with the southern extent of the proposed development land as currently drawn traverses a ridge line and the top of a watershed.
- 1.3.10 The sloping fields comprise sticky alluvial boulder clay and are unimproved and were very wet at the time of inspection with areas of high saturation and surface water. This water flows generally South to North for the majority of the site's area, but from the ridge line, it would flow from North to south, so the ridgeline is a natural watershed and this peaks at 110metres near the centre of the site's southern boundary.
- 1.3.11 A dense tree line running along the entire northern boundary of the site, is part of the vegetation growing on the roadside embankment itself. This embankment is a designated wildlife site. The

biodiversity of this embankment appears to be in decline, due to gradual forestation of any open grassland areas. The tree line serves to at least partially screen the site from South Hatfield in winter and this screening would be more complete in summer, when most parts of the site would be screened entirely from Hatfield, except perhaps the very highest ridge.

- 1.3.12 This is important in considering the possibility of development on the site and how any development might impact upon the site and the perceptions of the Green Belt and openness from South Hatfield.
- 1.3.13 Stretching from a point near to the north western corner of the site, and following one of the footpaths, a tall unmaintained hedge, runs to a mid-point along the southern boundary containing one individual significant oak tree. Further vegetation runs along the southern boundary of the site.
- 1.3.14 The second path is accessed via a steep stair case up the road embankment, and runs from a midpoint along the site's northern boundary to join the first path along the southern boundary. The conjoined paths then run west along the proposal boundary and south towards Dellsome Bottom.
- 1.3.15 There are a number of ponds (two on the proposal boundary) and 3 offsite (but within 500m of the site). This will be important in terms of future recommendations for ecological surveys. At least one of these ponds appears to contain fish and would be much less likely to support protected amphibian species, however, some are known to contain Great Crested Newts. A suitable survey and mitigation scheme would be required.
- 1.3.16 The northern boundary of the site runs along the top of the embankment to the South Way Road. The eastern boundary borders a wedge of community managed woodland, containing many mature trees and scrub and a central hoggin footpath, with grass verges. The southeast corner of the site bounds the former library site, currently proposed for the bad neighbour incinerator, but which was refused planning permission by her majesty's Inspector, although now under judicial review. The boundary is defined by a hedgerow, beyond which lies mostly grassed grounds.
- 1.3.17 There is one notable individual tree within the open field that should be protected, due to it

#### **1.4 Site Infrastructure and Social Capital**

- 1.4.1 To the East of the site immediately adjoining it, there is the Southfield Primary School for primary age children with special needs, including autistic children and was purpose-built in 1995. Beyond the school there is a residential area of the Millwards estate. Travellers Lane Employment Area, and important source of jobs and commercial hub locally and includes a busy Tesco depot.
- 1.4.2 To the South of the site there is open land separating the housing in Welham Green, from South Hatfield. Also adjacent to the site is the Millwards Recreation Ground, which includes a children's playground, adjoins the roundabout at the East end of South Way and there is other children's playgrounds exist within the "Fields" area, next to South Way.
- 1.4.3 On South Way, very close to New Barnfield, is the Hatfield Cemetery. There are many well used footpaths both around and within the site including a recommended Countryside Management Services walk which goes round the site – set out within a Herts County Council leaflet

recommending this walk. The Great North Way Cycle Track (national cycle route 12) runs near to the site – to the east.

- 1.4.4 The Hertfordshire University Park and Ride car park is located off South Way, just past the cemetery to the west of the site. It was built to alleviate the problem of students' cars parked on the residential streets of South Hatfield.
- 1.4.5 The whole area around and including New Barnfield is currently within the Green Belt, and also part of the Watling Chase Community Forest. A number of wild-life areas are on or near to the site. These include WS100 Grasslands North of Parsonage Road, WS98 New Barnfield Meadow, and WS101 South Way's Southern Road Verge. WS202, Travellers Lane Grasslands, Ponds and Wildlife site, is particularly important. Local people enjoy looking at wild-life here, including trees and birds. Warblers are reported to nest there, and there are carp in the Travellers Lane pond (known as Benchley's pond), offering a fishing facility, although precluding any protected amphibians.
- 1.4.6 There are reports of European protected Great Crested Newts in some of the ponds on or near to the site, and in the large Travellers Lane Pond which directly adjoins the site (known as Benchley's Pond), is unlikely to have GCN – due to the presence of fish. It is not anticipated that with suitable, approved and licensed mitigations measures, that there would be any substantive GCN or other ecological issue with the achievement of development of this site.
- 1.4.7 Hatfield House and its Estate (Millwards Park) is a historic park of the estate of Hatfield House is sufficiently far from this site to suffer no loss of quality of setting from development of this site, and the site exhibits no landscape evidence of any historic park character or features that might identify it as ever belonging to this park. This park is not prominent in any views from the site.

## **2 POLICY CONTEXT**

### **2.1 General Policy Matters**

- 2.1.1 The election of the Coalition Government in May 2010 signalled an intention to bring significant changes to the planning system and to alter radically the relationship between central and local government. This was brought about through the Localism Act 2011. Regional spatial strategies that had previously set housing and employment figures were abolished, and Neighbourhood Plans introduced. Driving these changes was the Government's commitment to securing long-term economic growth and addressing a national deficit in housing provision.
- 2.1.2 The development of the site needs to be considered against national and local planning policy context. Policies and advice contained within the following documents (and supporting Best Practice Guidance and Supplementary Planning Documents) have been reviewed:
- Localism Act (2010-2012)
  - National Planning Policy Framework (March 2012);

- Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council's Local Plan Update, dated 15<sup>th</sup> October 2014.
- Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council's Local Plan Consultation, dated January 2015.
- Landscape Capacity and Sensitivity Study.
- Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council's Landscape Character Assessment 2005.
- Regional and National Landscape Character Assessments.

## 2.2 National Planning Context

2.2.1 To assist development a new national policy was published in March 2012 entitled the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). This set out the Government's planning policies for England and how these are expected to be applied. The NPPF replaces all previous national planning policy including Planning Policy Guidance and Planning Policy Statements with immediate effect.

2.2.2 The NPPF sets out a clear presumption in favour of sustainable development, which should be seen as a '*golden thread*' running through plan-making and decision-taking. I will restrict my comments largely to matters pertaining to Green Belt and Special Landscape Designations.

- *Economic - building a strong economy and supporting growth:*
- *Social - supporting strong, vibrant and healthy communities and creating a high quality built environment;*
- *Environmental - protecting and enhancing our natural, built and historic environment.*
- *Delivering a wide choice of high quality homes: Ensuring that the Local Plan meets the needs for market and affordable housing in the area. Housing applications should be considered in the context of the presumption in favour of sustainable development;*
- *Requiring good design: Planning positively to achieve high quality and inclusive design for individual buildings, public and private spaces and wider area development schemes. Planning policies and decisions should aim to ensure that development will function well and add to the overall character of the area; establish a strong sense of place; optimize the potential of the site creating and sustaining an appropriate mix of uses (including green and other public space); respond to local character and history (while not preventing or discouraging appropriate innovation); create safe and accessible environments; and be visually attractive as a result of good architecture and appropriate landscaping.*
- *Promoting healthy communities: including the creation of safe and accessible environments and developments including clear and legible pedestrian routes and high quality public open space.*



- *Conserving and enhancing the natural environment: by inter alia protecting valued landscapes, minimising impacts on biodiversity, and providing net biodiversity gains.*
- *Conserving and enhancing the historic environment: In determining planning applications local authorities should also take into account the desirability of new development making a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness.*

2.2.3 The NPPF sets out the Government's planning policies for England and how these are expected to be applied. It sets out the Government's requirements for the planning system only to the extent that it is relevant, proportionate and necessary to do so. It provides a framework within which local people and their accountable councils can produce their own distinctive local and neighbourhood plans, which reflect the needs and priorities of their communities.

2.2.4 Pertaining to Housing, the NPPF states that local planning authorities should have a clear understanding of housing needs in their area. They should:

- a) Prepare a Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) to assess their full housing needs, working with neighbouring authorities where housing market areas cross administrative boundaries.
- b) The SHMA plan-making should identify the scale and mix of housing and the range of tenures that the local population is likely to need over the plan period which:
  - meets household and population projections, taking account of migration and demographic change;
  - addresses the need for all types of housing, including affordable housing and the needs of different groups in the community (such as, but not limited to, families with children, older people, people with disabilities, service families and people wishing to build their own homes);<sup>34</sup> and
  - caters for housing demand and the scale of housing supply necessary to meet this demand;
  - prepare a Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) to establish realistic assumptions about the availability, suitability and the likely economic viability of land to meet the identified need for housing over the plan period.

2.2.5 The NPPF defines the value of Green Belts. The Government attaches great importance to Green Belts. The fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open; the essential characteristics of Green Belts are their openness and their permanence.

2.2.6 However, there is an absence of reference to Special Landscape Areas or strategic gaps within the NPPF but instead there is guidance on how they should be used.

2.2.7 The NPPF establishes a clear presumption in favour of sustainable development based on three mutually dependent dimensions: economic, social and environmental. This '*which should be seen as a golden thread running through both plan-making and decision-taking.*' For decision-taking this means that '*where the development plan is absent, silent or relevant policies are out of date, planning permission should be granted unless the adverse impacts of doing so would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits.*'

2.2.8 Section 7 of the NPPF sets out guidance on design, based on the following key principles:

- *Good design is a key aspect of sustainable development, and should contribute positively to making places better for people (para. 56);*
- *Policies and decisions should aim to ensure that developments add to the quality of the area, establish a strong sense of place, optimise potential including the incorporation of green and other public space; respond to local character and history (without preventing or discouraging appropriate innovation), and are visually attractive as a result of good architecture and landscaping (para. 58);*
- *Design policies should avoid unnecessary prescription or detail and concentrate on guiding overall scale, density, massing, height, landscape, layout, materials etc. (para. 59) and seek to promote or reinforce local distinctiveness (para. 60); and*
- *Securing high quality and inclusive design should address the connection between people and places and the integration of new development into the natural, built and historic environment (para. 61).*

2.2.9 Section 11 of the NPPF sets out the principles to conserve and enhance the natural environment, including the protection and enhancement of valued landscapes (para. 109.) Local planning authorities should subsequently set criteria based policies against which proposals for any development on or affecting protected landscape areas will be judged. A distinction should be made in the hierarchy of designated sites so that the level of protection is commensurate with their status and gives appropriate weight to their importance (para. 113). The site area in question is locally designated as both Green Belt and Watling Chase Community Forest. This will be discussed in a later section.

2.2.10 From **core planning principles** on page 5 of the NPPF, Paragraph 17. Within the overarching roles that the planning system ought to play, a set of core land-use planning principles should underpin both plan-making and decision-taking. These 12 principles are that planning should:

- not simply be about scrutiny, but instead be a creative exercise in finding ways to enhance and improve the places in which people live their lives;
- proactively drive and support sustainable economic development to deliver the homes, business and industrial units, infrastructure and thriving local places that the country needs. Every effort should be made objectively to identify and then meet the housing, business and other development needs of an area, and respond positively to wider opportunities for growth.

Plans should take account of market signals, such as land prices and housing affordability, and set out a clear strategy for allocating sufficient land which is suitable for development in their area, taking account of the needs of the residential and business communities;

- always seek to secure high quality design and a good standard of amenity for all existing and future occupants of land and buildings;
- take account of the different roles and character of different areas, promoting the vitality of our main urban areas;
- contribute to conserving and enhancing the natural environment and reducing pollution. Allocations of land for development should prefer land of lesser environmental value, where consistent with other policies in the NPPF;
- encourage the effective use of land by reusing land that has been previously developed (brownfield land), provided that it is not of high environmental value;

#### 2.2.11 Definition of the Green Belt

The whole of the Welwyn Hatfield borough lies within the Green Belt. Government guidance within the NPPF (formally within PPG2) defines five purposes of including land in the Green Belt:

- To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built up areas;
- To prevent neighbouring towns from merging into one another;
- To safeguard the surrounding countryside from further encroachment;
- To preserve the setting and special character of historic towns; and
- To assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.

2.2.12 Once Green Belts have been defined, the NPPF states that local planning authorities should plan positively to enhance the beneficial use of the Green Belt, such as looking for opportunities to provide access; to provide opportunities for outdoor sport and recreation; to retain and enhance landscapes, visual amenity and biodiversity; or to improve damaged and derelict land.

### 2.3 Borough Wide Policy

2.3.1 Policy 5 of the Structure Plan confirms that the Green Belt will be maintained in the south of Hertfordshire which includes all of the land in Welwyn Hatfield. The Council recognises the important role of the Green Belt in the borough, particularly in preventing its towns and settlements from merging into one another, preserving the countryside and concentrating development into its urban areas. As such it is a key element in achieving sustainable development and must be maintained.

2.3.2 The towns of Welwyn Garden City and Hatfield, where development will be concentrated are excluded from the Green Belt. The detailed boundaries of the Green Belt around these settlements are defined on the Proposals Map.

2.3.3 These boundaries were defined in the first Borough Plan adopted in 1993 to take account of the long-term development needs of the borough. In preparing this Plan the Council has given consideration as to whether there is a need to alter the Green Belt boundaries to accommodate the development needs of the borough up to 2011 and beyond, but (*was at the time of drafting the adopted local plan - 1993*) satisfied that these needs can be accommodated on sites identified within the towns and specified settlements excluded from the Green Belt. Whether they remain satisfied is less certain.

2.3.4 Welwyn Hatfield BC's Own Green Belt Strategy

The main objectives of the Plan in respect of the borough's Green Belt and settlement pattern are:

- To maintain the Green Belt as the principal means of restraining the physical expansion of the borough's urban areas;
- To maintain the existing settlement pattern in the borough;
- To concentrate development into the borough's main towns and settlements;
- To maintain areas of special restraint between the urban area and the Green Belt, to be safeguarded to meet future growth needs beyond the Plan period and thereby ensure the permanence of the Green Belt boundaries.

2.3.5 The site lies within an area designated for becoming part of Watling Chase Community Forest is one of 12 Community Forests being established in the country. Initiated by the Countryside Agency and the Forestry Commission, the aim of the project is to achieve major environmental improvements around towns and cities through the creation of a mosaic of wooded landscapes, leisure enterprises, areas for nature and public open spaces. The Watling Chase Community Forest is located in the south of Hertfordshire and covers an area of 72 square miles. It extends over the southwest part of Welwyn Hatfield covering approximately 9% of the borough, including the Hatfield Aerodrome site. The Forest Plan was approved by government in March 1995. This was reviewed after 5 years, as the Forest Plan Review 2001, together with additions to the Forest Plan Landscape Assessment which was approved in February 2001.

2.3.6 The more recent Landscape Character Appraisal contained in Volume 2 of the Landscape Strategy for Hertfordshire updates the Landscape Assessment for the Community Forest. These documents should be considered together and provide a full explanation of the Community Forest proposals. The main aims of Watling Chase Community Forest are:

- To increase tree planting to 30% cover for non-urban areas;
- To produce a supply of home grown timber;

- To offer an alternative to agricultural use of land;
- To contribute to rural employment;
- To create attractive sites for people to enjoy;
- To enhance the natural beauty of the countryside;
- To create wildlife habitats;
- To reduce atmospheric pollution by absorbing pollutant gases.

2.3.7 Prior to the NPPF, which does not mention Community Forest, PPG2 stated that a Forest Plan may be a material consideration in preparing development plans and deciding planning applications and that any development within community forests in the Green Belt should be subject to normal Green Belt controls on development. The Council supported this advice with their Policy RA11 on drafting the Adopted Local Plan in 1993, but may take a different view now in terms of the challenging housing need.

2.3.8 Policy RA11 - Watling Chase Community Forest. The boundaries of the Watling Chase Community Forest are as shown on the Council's Proposals Map. Within the boundaries of the forest, the Council will seek to achieve the objectives of the Forest Plan in terms of planting, leisure and landscape improvement, where this accords with Green Belt policies. The Council will treat the Forest Plan as a material consideration in determining planning applications within its boundaries. Proposals for the provision of improved access to the forest and appropriate outdoor leisure and small scale recreational facilities will be permitted and will be required to be accompanied by substantial landscaping, including, where appropriate, woodland planting.

2.3.9 Policy RA10 - Landscape Regions and Character Areas

Proposals for development in the rural areas will be expected to contribute, as appropriate, to the conservation, maintenance and enhancement of the local landscape character of the area in which they are located, as defined in the Welwyn Hatfield Landscape Character Assessment.

2.3.10 Environment

A potential threat to that natural and built environment within the borough as highlighted above is future economic growth. In line with Central Government, the "new" Local Plan aims to both cater for economic growth in the borough and afford protection to the environment.

2.3.11 Housing

Housing is one aspect of economic growth that the Borough acknowledges needs to be provided. To deliver economic growth is one of the governments key criteria whilst protecting and enhancing both the natural and built environment and promoting principles of sustainability.

## 2.4 Emerging Policy

### 2.4.1 Settlement Hierarchy

The Settlement Hierarchy is distinguished within the Local Plan Consultation between Primary Retail Core, Large Neighbourhood Centres, Old Hatfield, Small Neighbourhood Centres, Large Village Centres, Small Village Centres, Other Villages and the Countryside.

### 2.4.2 Sustainability

The countryside comprises an important economic, social and environmental asset, which it is important to sustain. As the borough grows pressures will be increasingly placed upon the countryside in order that economic growth occurs. Policy CS19 of the Local Plan Consultation (January 15), Strategic Green Infrastructure, mentions the possibility of large areas of green belt being lost to development, but affording the opportunity to create a network of connected green open spaces providing access to natural green space, enhancing biodiversity and helping to mitigate the impact of development.

### 2.4.3 Affordable Housing

Lack of affordable housing provision within the borough is a major problem. Despite new housing being built in the borough, affordable housing as part of this new housing stock has been historically poorly delivered. To combat this Development Management Policy H7 details affordable housing provision to meet a particular local need for affordable housing.

2.4.4 The Local Plan Consultation will cover the period up to 2027 and will be the main planning document used by the Borough Council when considering planning applications. The Local Plan Consultation has been written in response to the Localism Act (2010 – 2012) and the NPPF (2012). It has been written in such a way that reflects the aspirations of the Central Government to hand control to local people when it comes to planning in their areas.

2.4.5 The complete local plan is in the process of being drawn up. Prior to its completion “saved” policies from the preceding local plan still remain in force.

2.5 **Conclusions within the Local Plan for this site being ‘Less favourable,’** (as per page 54 of the October 15<sup>th</sup> 2014 document).

2.5.1 The conclusions highlighted the strong defensible Green Belt boundary of South Way, and any re-definition would create a less well defined boundary of irregular shape. The conclusion also read that the development would also serve to close the gap between Welham Green and Hatfield. Access might be uncertain due to a need for a major junction – which would cut into the embankment - which is a wildlife site.

2.5.2 I have set out below my comments on these reasons within section 2.6 below and then again in a summary form within my conclusions, clause 3.

## 2.6 Responses to Conclusions within the Local Plan for this site being 'Less favourable,' (as per page 54 of the October 15<sup>th</sup> 2014 document).

2.6.1 The issue of closing the gap between the settlements of South Hatfield and Welham Green is a non-issue. No mention of strategic gaps (or in the language of the Local Plan Consultation document Jan 15 – Policy GBSP3 – Area of Special Restraint and Structural Landscape Area) is made within the NPPF and there are no national or local guidelines that stipulate how large or how small such a strategic gap should be. If we accept that it is desirable for settlements to be kept distinct from each other, and coalescence is bad, then the industrial development along the A1000 already serves to close the perception of a gap from this key road link. Behind this outward demonstrable industrial scale coalescence, there is open land and for the majority of the potential interface of the two settlements there are fields and trees which straddle a notable watershed, and as such this does effectively separate the two settlements – at least when perceived from Hatfield Cemetery, The Park and Ride or from the footpaths that traverse this area – which are key visual receptors.

2.6.2 The proposals maintain the perception of a gap, (or Structural Landscape Area) because from any point beyond the ridge line (which is for at least part of its length follows the 110m contour), looking south towards Welham Green, no development would be seen. From the ridge line, views north would reveal far views over South Hatfield and near views over open space and then the roof tops of new dwellings stepping down into the valley towards the South Way Road. Yes the 'gap' will be a little narrower (by 300m - measured from South Way to the new ridgeway footpath/ cycle route), but the gap will still be sufficient to substantively separate the two settlements and ensure no additional coalescence is created in visual terms.

2.6.3 The new local plan consultation suggests in terms of green belt policy CS4 that "...Green Belt and Safeguarded Land will need to be amended to accommodate the more dispersed approach to distributing growth around the borough set out in the intended changes to Policy CS3." The proposal site had been stated to be less favourable due to the impact on the Green Belt and the South Way Road affording a clear and defined strong boundary to Hatfield, and the proposals appeared to offer a weak and less well defined boundary, and that perhaps this was difficult to defend. This is pertinent to the NPPF section **core planning principles** on page 5, Paragraph 17, the set of core land-use planning principles that should underpin both plan-making and decision-taking, and... planning should:

- not simply be about scrutiny, but instead be a creative exercise in finding ways to enhance and improve the places in which people live their lives;
- proactively drive and support sustainable economic development to deliver the homes, business and industrial units, infrastructure and thriving local places that the country needs. Every effort should be made objectively to identify and then meet the housing, business and other development needs of an area, and respond positively to wider opportunities for growth.

This is pertinent because the site could accommodate development perfectly well if the proposal were not purely zonal, but landscape assessment led, so the development areas can be suitable

located and structured to ensure that all the threats and weaknesses are entirely mitigated, and the opportunities and strengths realised.

- 2.6.4 In terms of views into the site from South Hatfield and the perception of the Green Belt's openness from this settlement, the dense tree line along the southern embankment to the South Way link road, serves to partially screen the site in winter and the screening would be almost complete in summer, when most parts of the site would be screened entirely from Hatfield, except perhaps the very highest ridge line (land above 110 metres in height). This needs to be proven with a more detailed Landscape and Visual Appraisal (LVA) because this is important in considering the possibility of development on the site and how any development might impact upon the its character, and people's perception from receptors – be they landscape receptors - such as the Green Belt or visual - views into the site from dwellings to the north of South way.
- 2.6.5 The degree to which the site is visible from various receptors would need to be explored further within a detailed LVA and once a layout had been conceived, this should be completed with an impact assessment – to secure an LVIA. There are of course always variations in results from specific receptors according to a precise location and this could be drawn out by such a study to properly assess the magnitude of impact. However, preliminary investigations would suggest the magnitude of impact could be low, if the development were restricted to a height below the 105m contour.
- 2.6.6 What might be visible above this South Way embankment tree line would of course depend upon the elevation of the development. Initial studies would indicate that buildings of 8 metres in height (such as normal 2 storey residential dwellings) would become visible if built above the 105m contour, although this needs further proving. Indeed it may be the 103m contour is the key height, so to fine tune this preliminary finding, a more detailed study is required. However, if this guide above were correct, then much of the valley on the south side of the South Way Road could be developed, with low or negligible impact visually - and little damage to the perception of openness.
- 2.6.7 When considering views and perceptions from walkers along footpaths within the site, buildings of 8 metres in height would need to be set down into the valley 8 metres below the ridge line height of 110 metres, (for most of the site's length), so houses could sit at 103 metres and clear views to the horizon could be seen over the rooftops of such houses. This means that the garden curtilages could extend to the 105m contour, as the structures within these are invariably less than 2 metres in height. Therefore the development area on the strategy plan (in orange) has been shown up to the 105m contour. In reality most dwellings would be constructed well below the 103m contour, so they would have even less impact on views northwards from the ridge line.
- 2.6.8 Views south from the ridge line are limited – due to existing vegetation, but those that do exist would be unchanged and offer an open aspect and this would remain both Green Belt and Watling Community Forest in designation terms and serve to keep the settlements of South Hatfield and Welham Green apart. Views from Welham Green would be unchanged.
- 2.6.9 The benefit of the new proposals for a landscape and green infrastructure led scheme, can be seen on the strategy plan, affording the provision of a new strong and defensible green infrastructure



corridor from the 'park and ride' facility in the west to the school and industrial area to the east. This green infrastructure corridor would also contain a footpath cycle route, providing an alternative strong defensible Green Belt boundary. The proposed ridgeline route would serve to allow public access for its entire length – opening up and emphasising the experience of long views across Hatfield to the north, whilst creating a safe off-road facility and encouraging non carbon producing forms of travel. NPPF Section 8: Promoting Healthy Communities, states that planning policies should protect and enhance public rights of way and access. Local authorities should seek opportunities to provide better facilities for users, for example by adding links to existing rights of way networks including National Trails.

- 2.6.10 The Hatfield Cemetery is under pressure to expand - as demand increases and statistics demonstrate that this pressure will only be increasing, and the proposals enable this extension to take place – with the proposed route traversing the boundary between the existing site and the new extension site.
- 2.6.11 The proposals offer the opportunity and benefit of enabling a landscape and ecological management plan to improve the biodiversity of lands between the developable areas and the existing wildlife sites and ensuring the ecology services which might include the healthy community benefits of green infrastructure, green ecological connectivity corridors, shade pool provision, habitat creation, biodiversity enhancement programmes - through ecological management regimes.
- 2.6.12 There is an opportunity for a green infrastructure legacy through sustainable land adoption approaches – such as those emerging from new companies like OASIS Land Asset Management Ltd, which utilises sustainable funding strategies, to ensure high standards of landscape and ecological maintenance and management in perpetuity: An organisation that promotes community involvement and engagement to encourage active participation in management, management plan reviews and community-centric land uses. The NPPF Section 8: Promoting healthy communities. The planning system can play an important role in facilitating social interaction and creating healthy, inclusive communities.

## **2.7 Green Belt and Watling Chase Community Forest Designations**

- 2.7.1 The NPPF states that Green Belt serves five key purposes:
- to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;
  - to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another;
  - to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;
  - to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns; and
  - to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.
- Once Green Belts have been defined, local planning authorities should plan positively to enhance the beneficial use of the Green Belt, such as looking for opportunities to provide access; to

provide opportunities for outdoor sport and recreation; to retain and enhance landscapes, visual amenity and biodiversity; or to improve damaged and derelict land.

### 2.7.2. Welwyn Hatfield BC's Own Green Belt Strategy

The main objectives of the Plan in respect of the district's Green Belt and settlement pattern are:

- To maintain the Green Belt as the principal means of restraining the physical expansion of the district's urban areas;
- To maintain the existing settlement pattern in the district;
- To concentrate development into the district's main towns and settlements;
- To maintain areas of special restraint between the urban area and the Green Belt, to be safeguarded to meet future growth needs beyond the Plan period and thereby ensure the permanence of the Green Belt boundaries.

### 2.7.3. The main aims of Watling Chase Community Forest are:

- To increase tree planting to 30% cover for non-urban areas;
- To produce a supply of home grown timber;
- To offer an alternative to agricultural use of land;
- To contribute to rural employment;
- To create attractive sites for people to enjoy;
- To enhance the natural beauty of the countryside;
- To create wildlife habitats;
- To reduce atmospheric pollution by absorbing pollutant gases.

2.7.4. The Local Plan Consultation policy CS4 explains that the Green Belt boundary will have to be re-drawn and a "...more dispersed approach to distributing growth around the borough set out in the intended changes to Policy CS3. And later continues "...Insufficient opportunities have so far been identified to meet longer term needs for development beyond that period."

2.7.5. The site offers that opportunity and has been branded less favourable despite the potential opportunities for mitigation of the key factors that from a pure scrutiny point of view – it would at first sight appear to have. The key factor is that the hitherto given site area had a weak back line which would be less defensible and defined as the edge of the Green Belt. This former land area could have accommodated 400 homes, but would have changed the skyline entirely from an open one to an unmitigated built form. The proposal considered in the light of this preliminary landscape led appraisal might provide an opportunity for just 250 to 300 homes, but the skyline would remain open, and the ridgeline and watershed would form a strong visual and physical landscape boundary to the Green Belt, that was both clear on plan and readable by ordinary people using the landscape..

2.7.6 Through careful landscape planning and assessment based zoning, the overall significance of effects in landscape and Green Belt terms will be minor. Furthermore, the proposal would not compromise the aspirations of the Watling Community Forest, because the proposals provide ample land and opportunities to create significant new parklands, tree planting, habitat creation and recreational facilities.

2.7.7 The wider agricultural field contains one mature isolated veteran tree. This tree is characteristic of the wider landscape of the town as a whole and would need to be retained and protected and incorporated into the scheme. To help to ensure high quality design the integration of existing green infrastructure within the development would fulfill design aspirations of the Local Plan Consultation and the NPPF.

2.7.8 The proposals fulfil many of the policy criteria for new development, in terms of *inter alia*:-

- retaining key existing green infrastructure elements,
- protecting the integrity of green infrastructure,
- promoting green corridors that benefit and boost wildlife,
- the wildlife mitigation,
- replanting measures,
- responsive urban design, that acknowledges the Key Service Centre scale and character,
- creation of meaningful green infrastructure
- creation of leisure, sports and recreational opportunities
- house design and referencing,
- meeting affordable housing needs
- meeting sustainability requirements and the benefits of healthy ecology systems.
- the opportunity of setting in place a new sustainable model for landscape adoption and management.

2.7.9 The site is fairly self-contained, possessing a limited visual envelope. Views are restricted to the footpath network – apart from the ridge line - which should not be developed.

2.7.10 The green infrastructure proposals connect an important existing well vegetated hedgerow traversing the centre of the site, to a new significant green infrastructure feature and wildlife corridor, and from there to the wider countryside.

2.7.11 The proposed hedgerows and tree line of the new footpath/ cycle way along the ridgeline serve to extend existing wildlife corridors and links, promoting bio-diversity within the site and enhancing its

landscape value and a management plan and careful consideration of the adoption arrangements and CIL would ensure these are suitably maintained in perpetuity. This would amply offset any minor loss of the wildlife site from the creation of a new roundabout or other junction form along the South Way Road.

2.7.12 The site has some significant trees within the site, which should be protected and retained within the scheme. No arboricultural impact is envisaged from the proposals.

2.7.13 The proposals as shown on the accompanying landscape strategy plan, have generally low landscape and visual impact on the landscape setting and will be well mitigated by the proposed landscape, arboricultural and ecological proposals, and a more detailed LVA is needed to demonstrate this. There will, in my professional opinion, be no materially adverse impact on the Green Belt.

## **2.8 Recommendations and Key Issues**

2.8.1 There is a need to demonstrate the potential of the site and assess any preliminary impacts from development per se on this site through a more thorough landscape appraisal and outline development impact assessment.

2.8.2 Housing needs to be provided to maintain the quality of life within the borough, and has acknowledged that Hatfield as a key strategic centre for development is ideally placed to accommodate a percentage of this future housing. The factors that have been given that make the site less favourable compared to other sites within the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment can be mitigated with some careful thought to landscape factors and with due consideration to landscape planning of green and other infrastructure elements. Indeed, by virtue of its containment, its current land usage, relief, adjacent land usage, and potential for forming a new strong barrier, it is more than reasonable to suggest that this site is entirely suitable to accommodate the latent housing need.

2.8.3 An LVA should first be produced in advance of any application or exploration of development layout and this document should give solid recommendations which were taken into consideration to materially inform any proposals. These might well include inter alia:

- Retaining and enhancing the existing vegetated boundary to the south and east of the development, incorporating the existing hedgerow along one arm of the footpath leading south towards the ridge from South Way;
- Retaining existing mature trees to all boundaries;
- Enhancing boundary vegetation along the south side of the site providing a green infrastructure ridge line feature of trees, containing a footpath cycleway and strong Green belt boundary;
- Retaining the existing topography of the site to accommodate development in the valley and not interrupt long views over the valley from the ridgeline, or expose development from views southward from South Hatfield;

- Planting new trees in key locations, and creating meadow habitats.
- Well-sited buildings and spaces of appropriate form and massing:
  - i) *Inter alia* – to set the built development back from the top of the embankment along South Way to create an attractive, frontage and appropriate setting for trees improving natural surveillance.
  - ii) Create space within the development for new tree planting for tree loss mitigation, including street trees and trees within the new open space for future skyline impact and screening;
  - iii) Front of plots shall face the new open spaces for security/surveillance;
  - iv) Prevent visual impact from fences and rear gardens by ensuring the layout faces outwards onto green spaces; and rear gardens are internal and hidden behind houses wherever possible to ensure active frontages.
  - v) Create a new informal open space above the 105m contour and a strip along the top of the embankment along the South Way, to retain existing trees, and to create a naturalised vegetated green links and routes, braking up development parcels.
  - vi) The layout should use a variety of local building forms 2-2.5 storeys, reflecting the surrounding vernacular.

This would aid legibility in accordance with urban design and architectural principles and contributing to a varied roof scape, but not interrupting any views from the ridge line. It would also prevent creating a perception of buildings spreading beyond the ridge line, materially affecting the quality of the skyline, and ensuring the preservation of the green and open land separating the settlements of South Hatfield and Welham Green.

2.8.4 The following recommendations require further consideration during the detailed design phase of the development and could be the subject of planning conditions. Those of particular value are given for reference.

- Ensure completion of long-term (min. 10 year) combined landscape/arboricultural/ ecological management plan to ensure appropriate management, enhancement and sustainable retention of strategically important existing and new trees as well as the new ridgeline and existing and new boundary hedgerows/ tree planting;
- No dig solutions must be used where specified on arboricultural plans (refer to plans by Hayden Arboricultural Consultants (HAC) for more details);
- Preparation of an integral hard and soft landscape scheme for the development and open space. Sometimes the split between hard and soft landscape proposals can lead to the lack of consistency in the approach to the design and therefore this should be conducted together.

- A lighting scheme coordinated with tree planting is particularly important in order to ensure there is no collision between lighting columns and tree positions and threats to bats. The basic principles of the design have been agreed and are shown on the landscape strategy plan. The location of new trees has been chosen carefully away from the key through vista.

2.8.5 The following recommendations that might be given within a fuller LVA (November 2012), require further consideration during the construction of the development and could be the subject of planning conditions: These are summarised below.

- The protection of site features of landscape, ecological and amenity value:
- No construction of buildings, hard surfaces or services within root protection areas (RPA) of retained vegetation without suitable. The root protection areas should be protected throughout the course of the development.
- Site supervision by a qualified arboriculturist and ecologist during the construction phase will ensure that protective measures to retained vegetation/ species respectively are carried out;

### **3 Conclusions**

#### **3.1 Policy, Green Belt, Watling Community Forest and Coalescence**

3.1.1 The proposals as modified uphold the intention and purpose of national and local policies and does not contravene such policy in a harmful way that might serve to undermine that policy's future robustness nor to the aims and objectives of such policy to prevent loss of character, erosion of valuable countryside, denudation of protected Green Belt countryside, threaten the integrity of the strategic green gap, nor the potential as valuable open land that could uphold the objectives of the Watling Community Forest, through sensitive identification of developable zones, green and other infrastructure, layout and approach.

3.1.2 It is contested that the site can be developed with minimum adverse impact upon the landscape, the townscape and most receptors, although it is recognised that this would need further proving through a more detailed LVA process, conducted in accordance with the Guidelines of Visual Landscape Assessment by the Landscape Institute and Institute of Environmental Managers (GLVIA3).

#### **3.2 Summary**

3.2.1 Overall, the site is a highly suitable site (as proposed by the landscape Strategy plan) that will have positive benefits and mitigates the negative effects highlighted by the SHLAA. That is to say, development on this site would not create or contribute to coalescence, nor undermine the policy constraints in place and allow a new well defined Green Belt boundary. The boundary proposed incorporates a key topographical feature of this landscape - namely the ridge line. Ridge routes are

a common historic features in the wider area of Hertfordshire – and providing one here serves multi value purposes.

- 3.2.2 In summary, the proposals will provide a large area of naturalistic open space, habitat creation, natural play and playable open space - in accordance with Play England's 'Design for Play' proposals, opportunities for trim trail and off road physical exercise tracks and routes, a wildlife corridor – increasing biodiversity, bio-connectivity and providing opportunities for ecology systems to benefit the living experience of any homes provided and in so doing a valuable resource for the South Way Special Needs school.
- 3.2.3 The proposals retain footpaths and vegetation as existing, open up long views from the ridgeline, introduce a valuable new link between the South Way school, the industrial area and the Park & Ride facility, create a non-vehicular cycle route, enable the extension to the cemetery, preserve the strategic gap between South Hatfield and Welham Green, create a strong defendable Green Belt boundary and help meet housing need with minimal disruption to the wildlife site (embankment along the South Way Road), by widening the existing junction for the Hatfield Cemetery.
- 3.2.4 Overall, the proposals represent a key opportunity to make a significant contribution to the housing or commercial development need. The site is far from 'less favourable' if conceived in an imaginative and landscape sensitive way.