

Chief Executive: Owen Mapley



Ashwell Neighbourhood Plan
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Sent by email to:
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Dear Sir/Madam,

Regulation 14 Consultation on the Ashwell Pre-Submission Neighbourhood Plan

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Ashwell Neighbourhood Plan (ANP).

This representation is made by Hertfordshire County Council's (HCC) Growth & Infrastructure Unit. The comments within this representation reflect the interests of the following services that are provided by HCC (Excluding HCC Property), along with other relevant areas within the Environment & Infrastructure Department:

- Children's Services (School Place Planning)
- Countryside Services and Rights of Way
- Ecology
- Highways and Transport (Highways Authority and Strategic Transport & Rail)
- Historic Environment
- Lead Local Flood Authority

This representation follows the format of the consultation document itself. It should be noted that comments have only been made on the parts of the document and the sites contained within that are of interest to HCC. Comments relating to a specific HCC service and department have been stated.

General comments to the ANP follow on from the above.

Vision and Objectives

Ecology. The village as a valued rural setting is given great weight within the ANP. However, there is no reference to rural land management or the rural economy, and policies to ensure that it continues to be of value.

Highways Authority. The overall vision of the Ashwell Neighbourhood Plan is broadly supported by HCC as the Highways Authority.

However, the Highways Authority would seek an additional objective that supports and encourages the use of sustainable transport (e.g. walking, cycling and passenger transport) where possible. This is to ensure that the ANP is in line with HCC's Local Transport Plan 4 (LTP4) Policy 1: Transport User Hierarchy which supports the creation of built environments that encourage greater and safer use of sustainable transport modes. In order to achieve this, HCC will in the design of any scheme and development of any transport strategy consider in the following order:

- Opportunities to reduce travel demand and the need to travel
- Vulnerable road user needs (such as pedestrians and cyclists)
- Passenger transport user needs
- Powered two wheeler (mopeds and motorbikes) user needs
- Other motor vehicle user needs

Section 1: Housing-Sites Considered to Have Potential for Housing Development

Landscape. There is concern that development within these areas, could result in adverse landscape and visual effects.

It is therefore advised that, in order to ensure that any change does not have an unacceptable effect on landscape character and visual amenity, a site survey and analysis should be carried out to identify important landscape features and views (such as hedgerows, trees, and the orchard), and ensure that proposals seek to protect, conserve and enhance them.

Consideration should also be given for the impact of the sites upon the setting of the Conservation Area.

Site 1: Land Adjacent to Partridge Hill

Countryside and Rights of Way. Partridge Hill would have access from Partridge Hill/Byway: 'Open to All Traffic 15.' Vehicles are able to use this route legally but depending on the density of the development at this site, it is likely that the un-made up nature of the byway here, may not be able to be continued i.e., the surface may be upgraded to Highway Standards. This would be in conflict with Policy 8.f: '*to discourage proposals that would require a trackway to be surfaced, or upgraded to a road.*'

Ecology. This forms part of Local Wildlife Site: '06/008 Partridge Hall Field.' This should represent a significant constraint to development and an in-principle

objection. If housing is given greater weighting, it would require substantial Biodiversity Offsetting to compensate for the loss part of this site – assuming it still retains its former interest.

Site 2: Land of Former Factory Adjacent to 41 West End

Countryside and Rights of Way. Proposals for this site should not seek a new access onto Ashwell Byway: 'Open to All Traffic 15' which is adjacent to the site.

Ecology. The southern half of this site supports secondary woodland of local habitat value. Part of it was an orchard in the 1930s. If developed, significant Biodiversity Offsetting would be required to compensate for this loss.

Site 3: Land West of Gardiners Lane and North of the High Street

Ecology. This site supports a considerable amount of habitat at the local level including grassland, scrub, scattered trees and woodland, and is partly on the site of a former orchard in the 1880s, although it was gone by the 1930s. There is no data on this area to demonstrate what is present on the site, but loss to housing would be locally damaging and generate a need for Biodiversity offsetting.

It is of note that all of the proposed sites support local or higher ecological interest, in contrast to the adjacent land which is not identified but which does not include any interest of recognised importance.

Section 2: Design Considerations for New Developments

Landscape. The design considerations outlined within this section are fully supported; however they predominantly comprise aspects of architectural detail. It is suggested that there is an opportunity to include reference to how landscape features, such as verges, hedgerows and trees, make a positive contribution to the appearance of the village and should be strengthened. Another locally distinctive feature of the village is the street furniture, in particular the use of green bollards that should be identified and conserved and enhanced.

Section 3: Business and Economy

Policy 3.f

Strategic Transport & Rail. The aim of this policy which is: *'to explore ways to improve parking in the village to support local shops and businesses'* is not compliant with HCC's LTP4, as additional facilities for cars will encourage car use when more sustainable modes could be taken.

Section 4: Sport, Leisure and Recreation-Open and Connecting Spaces

Landscape. The reference to open space and the importance of the links between them is fully supported. It is strongly advised that this section should make reference to 'green Infrastructure' as this will provide a hook to the strategic green infrastructure policy within the North Herts Local Plan. It is also strongly advised that the key existing local spaces and connections should be identified on a map.

Opportunities for new open spaces and connections should also be identified, in order to guide any future change, and help secure their delivery on the ground.

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) states that 'The designation of land as Local Green Space through local and neighbourhood plans allows communities to identify and protect green areas of particular importance to them.' It is therefore encouraged to consider whether or not any of the local valued spaces in the village, such as the 'Springs', meet the criteria for designation.

Small Gains Lane area recreational complex

Countryside and Rights of Way. This is mostly accessed via Station Road. However, access is also available via Byway: 'Open to All Traffic 17/Ashwell Street.' Vehicles can legally use this route, but if this recreation area is improved and attracts more vehicular traffic, this should be on Small Gains Lane and not have a detrimental impact on the byway.

Section 7: Natural and Historic Environment

Ecology. The natural environment of Ashwell and its surrounds is summarised as background text to the plan. This includes rare chalky plant communities surviving on semi-improved pasture and the importance of local fruit trees. The value of local habitats and features associated with the village is contrasted with the surrounding intensively farmed landscape.

It is therefore of great concern that the identified important ecological characteristics are evident within all three of the sites identified for potential development. There is no recognition of this, or guidance for how this should be managed, and represents a significant conflict within the ANP.

The environmental description of the area is broadly acceptable and follows other published accounts. However, no mention is made of existing Local Wildlife Sites or other sites within the Hertfordshire Environmental Records Centre database. In addition to those sites already mentioned in the Neighbourhood Plan, there should be a map of these other sites in the plan or at least a reference to where information on them can be obtained (HERC based at Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust).

Landscape. National Character Areas are carried out at a national scale. It should be noted that these do not provide the depth of detail required to deal with matters at a neighbourhood scale.

It is strongly advised that there should be reference to the relevant local landscape character assessment and guidelines for managing change (as promoted within the North Herts Local Plan). The character assessments cover Hinxworth Lowlands, Steeple Moredon Plain and Baldock Uplands. The character area statements provide more detailed analysis of the local landscape, identifying its condition status as well as setting out a strategy and guide to managing positive change.

Countryside and Rights of Way. There are a number of threats to Hertfordshire's trees and climate change will influence the success of certain species whilst favouring others. Pests and diseases are also a threat.

Ash trees are a feature of the landscape of Ashwell and its environs. This species is threatened by the arrival of Chalara (Ash Die Back) in England, which was reported in 2012 (although likely in the UK 10 years before this date). Ash Die Back is highly likely to kill 90%+ of all Ash trees in England over the next decade or so, significantly altering the character of the English landscape. This is likely to impact on the village of Ashwell.

This should be mentioned within this section of The Neighbourhood Plan, along with identifying trees that could be planted as a requirement within new developments in the village that will both compensate for the loss of both landscape and habitat features as well as being resilient to a changing climate.¹

Policy 7.a

Ecology. This policy is supported, although from an ecology perspective, it is contradicted by the identification of all three housing sites in the plan.

Lead Local Flood Authority: The reference to "provide sustainable surface water drainage" is supported. It is suggested that the policy would be clearer if it read "provide surface water drainage using Sustainable Drainage System (SuDS) techniques," it is also suggested that this should include the caveat "where feasible." This is because the Lead Local Flood Authority (LLFA) can approve connections to sewers (which are not strictly sustainable in the sense of SuDS) where this is demonstrated to be the only feasible option. This is likely to be most relevant for smaller applications (up to 10 dwellings) where there may not be room to install SuDS. The LLFA is not a statutory consultee for minor applications such as this example.

Policy 7.b

Ecology. This policy is supported, although it is aspirational and it is considered that it requires resourcing. It is advised that the resources are not likely to be secured through development, as they are likely to direct funds into providing enhancements within the development itself and/or providing alternative ecological resources to compensate for those lost, especially if the potential housing sites are developed, consistent with NPPF achieving ecological gains.

Policy 7.c

Ecology. This policy is supported, although it is not clear how this will be achieved. It is advised that biodiversity will not be increased unless existing landowners or farm enterprises are able to enable or support such initiatives.

¹ Further information is available at: www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/services/recycling-waste-and-environment/countryside-management/tree-health.aspx#.

Policy 7.d

Countryside and Rights of Way. Ashwell Springs has public rights of way running through it. HCC is aware that the site is popular and well visited site and that it has high ecological importance. HCC is happy to take these facts into account with any of our works in the area.

Policy 7.e

Ecology. This policy is supported in part, although trees nearing the end of their natural life can still continue to support important ecological interest e.g. as seen in veteran trees, unless works are required to make them safe. Where appropriate, such trees should be retained and considered as being in managed decline.

Policy 7.f

Ecology. This policy is supported, although it is only considered achievable if the Parish Council is directly responsible for road verge management. Otherwise it would be the responsibility of Herts Highways contractors, and would also entail removal of cuttings if ecological interests are to be enhanced.

Policy 7.g

Countryside and Rights of Way. Arbury Banks is covered by Policy 7.g which states that: *“To encourage appropriate access and seek opportunities to monitor and improve the conservation of Arbury Banks.”* It should be noted that Byway: ‘Open to All Traffic 31’ and Restricted Byway 2, currently provide access to Arbury Banks.

Section 8: Traffic and Transport-Roads

Countryside and Rights of Way. It is considered that the ANP could place more emphasis on the investment of Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)/Section 106 on the improvement of the Rights of Way network within the village, which will enable active travel modes for short journeys within the village and encourage physical activity for health benefits through venturing out into the wider landscape. This might include improved drainage, bound or unbound surfacing, improved slopes/steps to enable walking and cycling.

As such the strategic principles of the Rights of Way Improvement Plan should be considered and can be viewed here: <https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/media-library/documents/environment-and-planning/countryside-access-and-management/rights-of-way/improvement-plans/rights-of-way-improvement-plan-201718-202728.pdf>.

Where new development is planned, consideration should be given to the creation of new public Rights of Way and green space that enables movement within and through the development into the wider village and beyond on foot, horseback, cycles and other non-motorised means. For this purpose, HCC does not consider the use of permissive paths appropriate due to their inherent temporary nature.

8.1 Roads

Highways Authority. Clarity is sought in relation to the trips that are stated within the third paragraph of section 8.1 (i.e. are these originating from the village or just passing through the village). Prior to the construction of the bypass, figures suggested that there was an issue during peak periods through the village from along Station Road and High Street towards the west. Comparing the figures with the 'After' counts, there was a change in the pattern of traffic flow through the village.

It is clear that during peak periods there was an overall drop in the number of vehicles travelling through Ashwell. While traffic in some directions had sometimes increased, it had also fallen in the opposite direction and the overall traffic flow was less than it was during the period before the bypass.

In the AM Peak, 221 less vehicles were recorded at the monitoring points post bypass, (a 27% drop) and in the PM Peak hour there was a 20% drop with 151 less vehicles recorded. Whilst HCC accepts that levels of traffic might have increased in the years post-delivery of Baldock bypass this can be attributed to growth in the area.

HCC also disagrees with the assertion that road maintenance within the village is inadequate. This sentence should be removed.

Policy 8.a

Highways Authority. Clarity is sought in relation to the comment: 'exceptional circumstances' regarding discouraging new developments that exceed the identified level of growth for Ashwell, resulting in adverse impacts on the existing transport infrastructure.

Policy 8.b

Highways Authority. This policy suggests the implementation of measures that reduce congestion and ease traffic flow in the villages. By achieving this, the network through Ashwell would in effect be improved to motorised traffic and could result in an increase of movements and possibly speed in/around the village. This would be in contrast to the ambition for reducing speeds within the village set out in Policy 8.d. The '*measures to carefully balance the requirements of all highway users*' would benefit from being aligned closer to Policy 1 in LTP4's user hierarchy.

Policy 8.c

Highways Authority. This policy suggests the removal of parked vehicles from the highway and improving the route for vehicle movements. It is not clear if this aligns with the ambition of the ANP and it is questionable whether this is compliant with LTP4.

Policy 8.d

Highways Authority. As this policy considers the introduction of a 20mph speed limit through the village, it is recommended that Ashwell work with the Highways Authority

to explore the introduction of a 20mph limit and if appropriate to secure contributions from developments to deliver this.

Policy 8.e

Highways Authority. This policy should be strengthened, in order for it to be aligned with LTP4's User Hierarchy, in order to ensure that any new development allows and encourages the use of sustainable transport.

Policy 8.f

Highways Authority. Further explanation is required within the supporting text to provide reasons for this policy in transport terms. Further reasoning such as walking and cycling routes and rights of way for access to the countryside should be included to strengthen the position in line with LTP4.

Policy 8.g

Highways Authority. As this policy suggests, any enhancements/change to road design that reflects the rural nature of the village would require an agreement of funding subject to the enhancements being acceptable. This is not an unusual arrangement for conservation areas such as Ashwell.

Policy 8.h

Highways Authority. This policy should be removed, as it is in relation to the maintenance of highways which HCC is responsible for and defects that are being identified in a timely manner.

General Comments

Children's Services (School Place Planning)

HCC is the Local Authority with the statutory responsibility for the provision of education services. It has a duty to ensure that there are sufficient school places to meet the needs of the population.

The villages of Ashwell, Sandon and Weston make up the Baldock Villages Primary Planning Area (PPA) with each village having its own village primary school. Ashwell Primary School is the only school in Ashwell village and serves its local community.

Primary pupil forecasts are based on education planning areas. The latest pupil forecast (published summer 2018/19) indicates there is little or no surplus places within the Baldock Villages PPA, demonstrated by demand exceeding the number of reception places available from 2018/19 onwards.

Ashwell Primary School has a Published Admission Number (PAN) of 30, offering 30 Reception places each year. It previously had a PAN of 38 however this required mixed age teaching (i.e. children from different cohorts being taught in the same class) to meet the class size legislation which caused the school significant budget

pressures. Therefore in light of the class organisation challenges and to ensure the school's long term financial stability, in 2016 Ashwell Primary School's PAN was reduced to 30. The school now has a permanent capacity of 210 places (1 Form of Entry).

When looking specifically at the village of Ashwell, latest analysis of pre-school aged children obtained from GP registrations indicates a close match between the number of 0-4 year olds residing within Ashwell and the number of places currently available at the school. Ashwell Primary School is therefore the right size currently to meet the needs of the local community it serves.

The North Hertfordshire District Council (NHDC) Local Plan 2011-2031 Regulation 19 Proposed Submission Plan (October 2016) identified only one housing site for Ashwell; land west of Claybush Road (ref AS1) for 33 homes. Site AS1 is considered an allocated housing site for this village for education planning purposes and as such, has been included within the school forecast. It is therefore considered that there is sufficient capacity at Ashwell Primary School to accommodate the children arising from the AS1 development.

New Homes in Ashwell

Primary. It is noted that within the ANP, three sites are considered to have the potential for housing development, a mix of affordable homes as well as retirement housing. HCC raises a concern with regards to the impact any additional new housing would have on pupil demand in the local area. Ashwell Primary School is currently full and has no expansion potential.

In 2017, HCC objected to a proposed development of 46 dwellings at land development off Station Road, Ashwell (planning reference 17/01406/1) in respect of education provision in Ashwell. HCC subsequently attended an appeal hearing in October 2018 to voice its concerns if an unallocated site came forward for housing and the significant issues this would raise in terms of pupil place planning, particularly with regard to providing sustainable places for primary age children. The planning inspectorate reference is APP/X1925/W/17/3192151.

Other housing sites, such as the appeal site (land off Station Road) and those proposed within the Ashwell Neighbourhood Plan have not been included with HCC's primary education strategy for the area. It is therefore considered that the additional pupil yield arising from any new homes proposed in Ashwell could not be accommodated at Ashwell Primary School as this would increase pupil demand beyond the capacity of the school. It is therefore likely that pupils from any other housing sites which are granted in Ashwell would likely need to travel to schools outside the village.

In summary, Ashwell Primary School at 1FE has no further expansion potential to mitigate the impact of any further development.

Secondary. No comments with regards to impact on secondary education provision, as there is considered to be some expansion potential should it be required at Knights Templar School.

Page 36, Section 6.2-Secondary Schools

Ashwell Primary is not a feeder school to Knights Templar School in Baldock. Ashwell is within the Priority Area for Knights Templar School, so pupils who live in the village applying for a place would be more likely to be offered a place than those living outside of Knights Templar Priority Area.

For information the Priority Area for Knights Templar School consists of Baldock, and the Parishes of Ashwell, Bygrave, Caldecote, Clothall, Edworth, Hinxworth, Newnham, Radwell, Rushden, Sandon, Wallington and Weston.

Ecology

Policies 7.a-c and 7.e, f, are generally supported as good intentions, but most do not seem to reflect measures that can be influenced by planning matters. This is at odds with a Neighbourhood Plan which seeks to '*give communities direct power to develop a shared vision for their neighbourhood and shape the development and growth of their local area.*' (Neighbourhood Planning, UK).² Such plans are designed to influence the nature of local growth, not simply provide desirable environments. In this respect the challenge is to link the two where possible and ensure growth makes a positive contribution to such matters. Currently, it is more of an ecological strategy to be adopted by the Parish Council as an administrative or landowning body rather than an approach that will influence the environmental outcome of planning matters.

With regard to this in terms of planning, there is:

- No reference to the major policy guidance included within NPPF and ecological policies which will guide local decision-making, principally to identify local ecological resources, the hierarchy of site status, management requirements, restoration and enhancement and seek to provide measurable net gains in biodiversity. This also includes priority habitats or species, natural capital or ecosystem services, or establishing ecological networks, green infrastructure, corridors or stepping stones;
- No mention of design or development briefs or master-planning to influence the nature and character of local development.
- No references to local Green Space designation which can be based on biodiversity richness;
- There is only a passing reference to Climate Change in relation to mitigation and adaptation, and long term implications including biodiversity and landscaping.
- Reference to light pollution is only in respect of street lighting. It should be considered wherever new or existing lighting replacement requires planning permission with appropriate measures required to control it;

² Government rev. Sept 2018

- No mention of allotment provision or community orchards etc. as potential positive enhancements locally;
- No mention of the Local Authority's statutory obligation in respect of its Biodiversity Duty under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006;
- No mention of the Government's 25 year Environment Plan.

The ANP makes an important contribution to local understanding and the aims for the Parish of Ashwell. However, in terms of biodiversity it currently does not appear to link sufficiently to the planning drivers that will influence change or develop opportunities that planning may generate which could help to support the stated aspirations.

Historic Environment

The ANP is not clear and consistent as to how it will conserve the historic environment. The ANP does not appear to have consulted the Historic Environment Record (HER), nor is it mentioned at any point in the document. NPPF paragraphs 187 and 189, along with footnote 62 note that the HER should be used in decision making.

The Objectives of the plan (page 11) do include the conservation and enhancement of the historic character of Ashwell which is supported. However, they do not include the conservation and enhancement of the historic environment. The NPPF notes that the purpose of the planning system is to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development which is defined as including the protection and enhancement of the historic environment (NPPF, paragraphs 7, 8, 20, 28).

The criteria for identifying and assessing sites for housing development includes criteria which aim to conserve and enhance the significance of heritage assets, both undesignated and designated as well as the historic character of Ashwell. The county council supports this. However there is no requirement to include assessment for the potential for housing sites to include currently unknown heritage assets. This may include heritage assets which are worthy of designation.

Three sites are put forward in the plan for housing. Sites 2 and 3 should be archaeologically assessed prior to a planning application being approved, since it is possible that they may contain heritage assets which may be a constraint on development. However these are not likely to affect the principle of development. Site 1 should be subject to archaeological conditions, if planning permission is granted. This advice is based on current archaeological knowledge and may change should new information be made available.

HCC supports the intentions in Part 2 of the ANP to require local characteristics to be reflected in any new development.

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HCC also supports the inclusion of undesignated as well as designated heritage assets in the requirements of part 7.2 (The Historic Environment). However there is no requirement to include assessment for the potential for (housing) sites to include currently unknown heritage assets. This may include heritage assets which are worthy of designation.

Policies 7.g and 7.h are unclear with regard to the historic environment. Policy 7.g refers to a Scheduled Monument, (Arbury Banks) and Policy 7.h includes the aspiration to identify and catalogue relevant non-designated heritage assets. Page 43 states that the policies are intended to apply only to those heritage assets that contribute to the character or appearance of the area. These policies should be clarified. Scheduled Monuments are already legally protected and overseen by Historic England. Part 7.2 notes that the area of the plan contains four Scheduled Monuments as well as listed buildings and other heritage assets. It is not clear how the plan will seek to conserve and enhance these. The policies should include provision to identify and conserve currently unknown heritage assets, which as noted above may include assets which are worthy of designation.

The HER already holds information about non-designated heritage assets yet it is not mentioned by the document. Also the HER is hosted by HCC yet the policy only refers to working with North Herts District Council and local groups. Therefore, the objectives of both policies are not clear and consequently as a whole, the policies in the ANP do not demonstrate how it will contribute to the overall conservation and enhancement of the historic environment in Ashwell.

Yours faithfully,

Martin Wells

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