

## **Report to the Cabinet**

**Report reference: C-042-2022/23**

**Date of meeting: 13th March 2023**



**Epping Forest  
District Council**

**Portfolio: Place – Cllr. Nigel Bedford**

**Subject: North Weald Airfield Strategic Masterplan**

**Responsible Officer: Nigel Richardson (01992 564094)**

**Democratic Services: Adrian Hendry (01992 564246)**

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### **Recommendations/Decisions Required:**

**(1) To note the process undertaken and the outputs from the public consultation on the Draft North Weald Airfield Masterplan undertaken between December 2021 and February 2022.**

**(2) To agree that the North Weald Airfield Strategic Masterplan be formally endorsed in order for it to be taken into account as an important material consideration in the determination of future planning applications, and to inform pre-application advice, assessing planning and any other development management and implementation related purposes relating to the site.**

**(3) To agree that the Planning Services Director, in consultation with the Planning Portfolio Holder, be authorised to make minor amendments to the North Weald Airfield Strategic Masterplan, including any mapping and links, prior to publication.**

### **Executive Summary:**

1. The formal consultation on the draft North Weald Airfield Strategic Masterplan ('the Strategic Masterplan') finished on the 6<sup>th</sup> February 2022. This was the second stage of public consultation undertaken and concludes the public engagement part of the process to inform the preparation of the Strategic Masterplan.
  - 1.1 Since February 2022 the Strategic Masterplan has been subject to extensive review and scrutiny by both the professional team engaged in the drafting of the Strategic Masterplan, and the Council, as Local Planning Authority, to ensure the Strategic Masterplan has incorporated, where necessary and appropriate, the consultation responses. Following this review officers are of the view that the Strategic Masterplan can now be formally endorsed.

- 1.2 Key points made during the formal consultation period are outlined within the report below and are set out in more detail in the Consultation Report attached at Appendix 2.

### **Reasons for Proposed Decision:**

2. The Masterplan has undergone extensive scrutiny and where necessary and appropriate changes have been undertaken in accordance with the masterplanning process set out in the Council's Strategic Masterplanning Briefing Note which was endorsed by the Council's Cabinet in October 2018. This has included review of the emerging Strategic Masterplan by EFDC's Quality Review Panel (QRP) and following receipt of responses to the first and second stages of public consultation. The Strategic Masterplan is considered to be capable of endorsement as an important material consideration in the determination of any planning applications and will be taken into account as such. It will also be used to inform the provision of pre-application advice and other development related purposes.

### **Other Options for Action:**

3. To not endorse the North Weald Airfield Strategic Masterplan as an important material consideration in the determination of planning applications. This could result in a delay in delivering new high quality and sustainable employment floorspace in the District.

### **Background:**

4. The Epping Forest District Local Plan 2011 – 2033 (the Local Plan) promotes a joined up, collaborative and proactive approach to the planning and implementation of key strategic sites across Epping Forest District. The production of Strategic Masterplans and Concept Framework Plans ensures that development proposals are brought forward in accordance with the Council's priorities, planning policies and facilitate the delivery of necessary infrastructure.
5. Strategic Masterplans and Concept Framework Plans provide an overarching framework to ensure that development is brought forward in a coordinated and coherent way in accordance with high quality placemaking principles. Any relevant planning applications must demonstrate general conformity with an endorsed Strategic Masterplan or Concept Framework Plan.
6. The Council's adopted Strategic Masterplanning Briefing Note (October 2018) sets out the process by which Strategic Masterplans and Concept Framework Plans for sites allocated in the Local Plan. This requirement is set out in the supporting text to Policy SP 2 Place Shaping and in respect of North Weald Airfield in the place specific Policy P 6 North Weald Bassett.
7. North Weald Airfield has been allocated in the Local Plan as a Masterplan Area under 'P 6 North Weald Bassett'. The Masterplan Area comprises the operational airfield (including associated runways, taxiways, and grassed areas), an existing area largely comprising of industrial and commercial uses which is designated under

Policy NWB.E4B (Bassett Business Park and Merlin Way Industrial Estate) and an area of land allocated under Policy NWB.E4A for offices, research and development and light industrial uses. The Strategic Masterplan focuses on the area of land covered by Policy NWB.E4A and NWB.E4B but has had regard to the wider North Weald Airfield Masterplan Area. The areas to the eastern side of the airfield are identified as locations that could be developed to provide employment opportunities that are sustainable and promote and encourage the use of sustainable methods of transport to provide viable alternatives to the private car. Any measures should provide for, and encourage, more sustainable travel patterns by contributing toward integrated walking and cycling opportunities, and improve public transport connectivity to the wider areas, including Epping and Harlow.

### **Masterplan**

8. In accordance with best practice the Local Plan contains a requirement that a Strategic Masterplan for North Weald Airfield is produced. This is in order to ensure that proposed development on the site is brought forward in a comprehensive and co-ordinated manner in order to achieve high quality and sustainable development which incorporates the place making principles of the Local Plan. This includes meeting the Council's expectations in terms of the quality, scale and nature of employment floorspace to be delivered, providing sustainable transport opportunities and other supporting infrastructure and services, responding to the environmental context, and responding appropriately to the outputs from community engagement.
9. The preparation of the Strategic Masterplan was supported by a wide range of technical work including in relation to, environmental issues, biodiversity, transport, heritage, and sustainability considerations.
10. Specific technical advice was also sought having had regard to the proximity of the employment land to the operational part of the airfield.

### **Matters Arising from Initial Consultation**

11. A total of 73 feedback forms containing 1,267 separate comments were received from the initial public consultation undertaken between November and December 2020. Whilst these were broadly supportive, points were made and issues were raised in relation to the following:
  - The range and size of the buildings and their proximity to North Weald Village;
  - Highway access and general transportation issues;
  - Environmental considerations, green corridors, and links with the separate residential development;
  - Future use of the existing Control Tower and the retention of views of the airfield;
  - The provision of a range of employment opportunities that meet current and future needs and aspirations;
  - The specific employment needs of the young, especially graduates and new entrepreneurs; and
  - The impact on existing business that use (the southern end) of the site.

12. These, responses helped to inform the development of the draft Strategic Masterplan prior to its publication for a further round of consultation.

### **Formal Consultation**

13. A formal stage of consultation on the draft Strategic Masterplan took place between December 2021 and February 2022. This represented an extended 8-week period of consultation to take account of the Christmas/New Year Period.
14. The formal consultation included two online and one in-person events. The two online events were attended by 52 people and the in-person event was attended by 75 people. More than 3,000 flyers were distributed to homes and businesses of North Weald Village, Hastingwood and Thornwood on the 9<sup>th</sup> December 2021 and a second flyer was distributed to the same areas on the 25<sup>th</sup> January 2022. In addition, social media platforms were utilised, the project website ([nwairfieldconsultation.co.uk](http://nwairfieldconsultation.co.uk)) was regularly updated and project emails were sent to more than 30 local stakeholders. The project website, which was launched in November 2020, provided access to the consultation material and received in excess of 6,900 visits following its launch. Statutory consultees were notified formally and 10 one-to-one meetings (online and in-person) were held with stakeholders across both stages of the consultation. A total of 201 feedback forms were received and seven responses from statutory consultees were also received. More details on the representations made are set out in the Consultation Report attached at Appendix 2. Statutory Consultee responses can be found at Appendix 3.
15. The following feedback was received from respondents:
  - Respondents expressed a desire to understand more about the NWA Masterplan and how the development process would occur in the future;
  - Priorities given to preserving the site's heritage and maintaining the identity and village character of North Weald Bassett;
  - Concern was expressed in relation to existing road infrastructure and the potential increase in traffic congestion and pollution resulting from future development at the site;
  - Points were raised with regards to the future operation of the airfield and how these would be accommodated;
  - Comments were also raised in terms of site layout and the design approach;
  - Respondents also raised concerns in relation to environmental and sustainability matters including the potential option for a wider green buffer between the proposed development and the village edge at the south eastern part of the site; and
  - Procedural matters were raised in relation to phasing and planning application processes.
16. Individual stakeholder meetings were also held throughout both stages of the consultation process with the following groups:
  - Parish Councillors and other Elected Members;
  - Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group;
  - Current site tenants;

- Epping Forest District Youth Councillors;
  - Countryside Properties (developers for North Weald Bassett Urban Extension); and
  - Saunders Markets.
17. The stakeholder meetings demonstrated support for the NWA Masterplan and the local employment opportunities, employment units and active travel improvements that were expected to arise as a result of it. The stakeholder meetings also highlighted potential highway impacts and the need to mitigate environmental impacts.
  18. Consultation was also undertaken with the operators of the airfield in order to fully understand their requirements. This identified the need for a new control tower, new secure boundary, the provision of a new internal access road, and safeguarding requirements.
  19. Following the receipt of these public consultation comments and stakeholder meetings, further work was undertaken to address the points and issues raised and outlined above. As a result of the matters raised changes have been made to the Strategic Masterplan where necessary and/or appropriate. The Consultation Report attached at Appendix 2 gives further details of the consultation process and comments that were received.

## **Report**

20. North Weald Airfield sits in close proximity to the North Weald Bassett Masterplan Area to the east which is allocated in the Local Plan for a minimum of 1,050 new homes together with associated infrastructure.
21. North Weald Airfield has been allocated in the Local Plan as a Masterplan area under 'P 6 North Weald Bassett'. The Masterplan area comprises the operational airfield (including associated runways, taxiways, and grassed areas), an existing area of largely industrial and commercial uses which is designated under Policy NWB.E4B (Bassett Business Park and Merlin Way Industrial Estate) and an area of land allocated under Policy NWB.E4A for offices, research and development and light industrial uses. The Strategic Masterplan focuses on the area of land covered by Policy NWB.E4A and NWB.E4B but has had regard to the wider North Weald Airfield Masterplan Area.
22. Local Plan Policy P 6 North Weald Bassett provides the site-specific requirements that both the Strategic Masterplan and any subsequent development proposals will need to respond to.
23. Parts N and O of Policy P 6 state that development proposals at North Weald Airfield must be in general conformity with a Masterplan for the North Weald Airfield, and in addition must make provision for more specific elements such as community uses to the east of the main runway; retention and expansion of aviation uses to the west of the main runway; approximately 10 hectares of additional employment land of B2, B8, offices, research and development and light industrial (within Use Class E) uses to the east; a new access from Epping Road to service the west of the site; preserving or enhancing the special architectural or historic interest of the Grade II

Listed Control Tower and its setting; a Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace between the two Masterplan Areas; and new and improved Public Rights of Way and cycle linkages with the surrounding area including east to west connectivity between the two Masterplan Areas (North Weald Airfield and North Weald Bassett).

24. Section 1 (Introduction) of the Strategic Masterplan sets out the overarching vision for North Weald Airfield which is to create a new, highly sustainable and modern employment area which respects the Airfield's history whilst realising its long-term future as a key employment provider in the District. The policy context is also set out here including Local Plan Policy P 6 which gives detail in relation to what the Strategic Masterplan must make provision for as outlined above. This section also details that the site is located within the UK Innovation Corridor (UKIC) which is described as linking the unique strengths of the cities of London and Cambridge and includes the Harlow and Gilston Garden Town. Also highlighted is the location of the District within the Essex and Hertfordshire Digital Innovation Zone (DIZ) which covers the geographic region of the majority of Innovation Core which is part of UK Innovation Corridor (UKIC).
25. Section 2 (Background & Site Context) of the Masterplan goes into detail concerning the site location and surrounding context and the development, accessibility and connectivity of the site. Also discussed in this section are accessibility & connections; heritage considerations; landscape, topography, views & trees; and environmental considerations including noise, air quality, flood risk and drainage, and ecology and biodiversity. Land quality matters such as potential pollutants and contamination are also detailed in this part of the Masterplan as well as heritage considerations, particularly with regard the Grade II Listed Control Tower.
26. Section 3 (Engagement) outlines engagement and consultation matters and sets out information in relation to the community and public consultation activities that were undertaken. These are outlined in more detail from paragraph 11 above. A Consultation Report has also been produced outlining further details of the consultation and engagement activities undertaken and the feedback received. This is attached at Appendix 2.
27. Section 3 also gives details of responses to consultation and stakeholder engagement activities. As stated above consultation with the operators of the airfield was also undertaken to better understand any future requirements including the provision of a new control tower and fire station, new secure boundary, new internal access road and airfield safeguarding requirements.
28. Section 3 also gives details in relation to the two Quality Review Panels that have taken place and their key overarching comments are summarised as follows. These have been considered as part of the development of the Masterplan:

#### QRP 1 - December 2020

- The relationship between the employment uses on this site, and the new community being brought forward by Countryside Properties to the north east at North Weald Bassett requires further investigation
- Excellent walking and cycling routes will be a key part of this.

- The proposed location of the SANG creates an opportunity for the creation of enjoyable green routes between new and existing residential areas and employment uses on the Airfield site.
- The panel would encourage the design team to be more aspirational in the vision that they set out for the development, building on the concept of entrepreneurial green growth including critical thinking about the risk that it may become an airside distribution centre.
- Norms of warehouse construction should be questioned. For example, encouraging timber frames, rather than steel, could be part of the unique selling point of this scheme, as well as delivering substantial carbon savings.
- In terms of planning process, the design team should engage with the neighbourhood planning process already underway in the area.
- The three elements: the Airfield site; North Weald Bassett; and the emerging Neighbourhood Plan should be developed through collaborative working, to achieve a cohesive vision for the area; particularly, how this will develop and function together.

#### QRP 2 - November 2021

- The panel is pleased to see the progress made since the previous review but
- encourages the design team to be a lot more ambitious and bolder.
- The masterplan should be landscape led and support the creation of a distinctive place that is informed by the context and history of the site.
- Proposals are currently too generic, and lacking a clear sustainability strategy, which should be fundamental to the placemaking approach.
- Approach to the spine road is problematic, and the panel recommends that pedestrian and cycle access is integrated with the main access routes.
- Cycle and walking routes through woodland adjacent to the SANG are an attractive idea, they are unlikely to feel safe at night, and should not be the only option.
- Central market square north of the control tower is a positive addition to the scheme, but the panel would like to see this framed by active frontages - whereas currently its edges are characterised by roads and car parking.
- Connectivity of the site to the wider area needs to be considered further.
- Relationship between the employment uses on this site, and the new community being brought forward by Countryside Properties to the north east at North Weald Bassett requires further investigation.
- A successful sustainable transport approach will require improvements to bus services to be developed in relation to phasing, so they can be delivered from the outset.

29. Section 4 (Site Evaluation) of the document provides a Site Evaluation outlining Considerations and Opportunities pertaining to the site including heritage assets such as the Grade II Listed Control Tower and its setting, airfield requirements, environmental factors, highways and movement matters including access points, the Public Rights of Way network, expansion of cycle and pedestrian network, and built environment considerations including in relation to existing buildings on the site and the existing residential area to the south-east. Section 4 also details the Site Development Strategy that has been prepared which sets out how the Masterplan responds to constraints and airfield requirements as well as how the opportunities

that the site presents could be maximised. Site opportunities include an expansion of sustainable movement through Public Transport provision, walking and cycling, incorporating environmental credentials including NetZero Carbon Development, and supporting place making objectives through measures such as the provision of a community facility or café in the Listed Control Tower.

30. Section 5 (Design Objectives & Evolution) explores the achievement of wider design objectives as well as setting out more detailed frameworks in relation to land use, green infrastructure, movement, placemaking and sustainability objectives. These frameworks provide further guidance pertaining to location and uses of development parcels, integration of proposed development into its landscape setting and new green and blue infrastructure opportunities, identification of the existing surrounding movement network and new opportunities to integrate the site into it, and a placemaking framework. This section also outlines key sustainability objectives including governance, social and economic wellbeing, resources and energy, land use and ecology, and transport and movement.
31. Section 6 (Strategic Masterplan) provides an illustrative site sketch and outlines how the development of the site could provide for the regeneration of existing employment premises on the site alongside a significant quantum of new employment floorspace being provided. Section 6 also reinforces the need to provide a new north-south green link, the reconfiguration of existing access points, the provision of new pedestrian and cycle access points, biodiversity, SuDS and greening opportunities as well as the provision of a new energy centre.
32. Section 7 (Design Parameters) comprises details of design parameters in relation to employment land uses, building heights, scale and massing, character and layout, building form and frontages, materials and appearance, landscape, views and trees, biodiversity and ecology, heritage, energy and utilities, drainage and flood risk, and movement and access.
33. Section 7 recognises that, in order to respond to the needs of both new and established businesses, there will be a need to provide a range of unit sizes and types of accommodation and also recognises the potential for a business innovation centre to be provided as part of the development of the airfield. Section 7 also recognises that other facilities that support businesses and employees based at the site should be provided including café/restaurant uses, creche, gym, and conferencing facilities.
34. In relation to building heights, scale and massing this section also sets out the need for proposals to consider the existing Grade II Listed Control Tower and key views which is also echoed in the Heritage parameters requirements. Existing residential development and the airfield's Obstacle Limitation Surface (OLS) restrictions must also be considered. It is also suggested that buildings step up in height moving away from the Control Tower in order to preserve its setting.
35. With reference to character and layout the document emphasises that the mix of proposed character areas on the site should relate to the positive characteristics of the site and surrounds whilst also maximising opportunities. This includes safeguarding the operational activities of the airfield, having due regard to the



heritage of the site, ensuring building heights take into account existing views and heritage matters, and the inclusion of amenity and public green spaces to support placemaking aspirations.

36. The document also outlines how building form and frontages will contribute to the character and identity of the site and are a key design consideration in determining the quality of the development. Particular emphasis is placed on the central part of the site where the Listed Control Tower is located along with proposed key pedestrian and cycle routes and active frontages.
37. With regard to materials and appearance, Section 7 states that materials palettes should be small in range and well considered, respecting local materials, colours, styles and detailing. In addition, architecture should respect and complement the Control Tower and contribute towards the character and identity of the development.
38. In relation to landscape, views and trees, the parameters outlined in the document note the establishment, maintenance and enhancement of green corridors; the retention of existing trees and groups where possible; and the maximisation of environmental opportunities on the site including a new north/south green link. This is also echoed in the biodiversity & ecology parameters which set out that the site must aspire to deliver at least 10% Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) and utilise SuDS interventions and retain and enhance habitats of higher ecological value. Drainage and flood risk parameters also set out attenuation measures such as basins, permeable paving and rainwater harvesting amongst other possible interventions.
39. With regard to heritage, the document reiterates at this point that the development of the document has been influenced by the location of the Grade II Listed Control Tower and emphasises that proposals for the site must include flexibility to mitigate against any potential impact on built heritage assets, including the provision of a new long-term use for the Control Tower and the establishment of a Heritage Trail within the site.
40. In relation to energy and utilities the provision of development with excellent sustainability credentials, and the opportunity to integrate a new electrical network facilitating the deployment of low carbon technologies is emphasised. The document also outlines that a comprehensive energy strategy should be developed exploring net zero carbon development options.
41. Lastly for this section, in relation to movement and access the document notes that two vehicular points of access should be maintained from Merlin Way including the potential reconfiguration of the northern point as a primary access. In addition, the existing access point of Epping Road will be maintained to serve the southern employment section of the site, and a new bus route connecting to the North Weald Bassett Masterplan Area and the train station should be explored. Electric Vehicle charging points and cycling infrastructure will also be required.
42. The final section, Section 8 (Phasing & Delivery) details how the development of the site would be phased. This is as follows:

Phase 1 - the construction of the new Airfield Tower and associated infrastructure and new Energy Centre and highways work along the stretch of Merlin Way;

Phase 2 - the development of the northern third of the main site comprising larger B2/B8 uses;

Phase 3 - the central section of the site would be developed including the repurposing of the existing Control Tower and the completion of the primary route highway work including and works required to Merlin Way; and

Phase 4 – delivery of the southern part of the site including smaller units such as offices and small-scale light industrial uses.

Other works such as development in the south-eastern corner are envisaged to be delivered as a standalone phase whilst landscaping and ecological works will follow in sequence with the development of each phase.

### **Conclusion**

43. It is the view of officers that the Strategic Masterplan provides a sound basis and strong vision supported by clear objectives and framework against which future planning applications can be assessed.
44. It is therefore recommended that the Masterplan be endorsed as an important material consideration<sup>1</sup> in the determination of any planning applications.

### **Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA)**

45. An EqIA has been undertaken and is attached to this report (Appendix 4).

### **Resource Implications:**

46. Continued engagement with stakeholders and assessment of future planning applications will require ongoing resource to ensure appropriate development is brought forward and implemented. This will require adequate Officer and where appropriate consultant resource either within the Development Management Team and/or the Joint Planning Implementation Team which it is intended will be secured through a Planning Performance Agreement.

### **Legal and Governance Implications:**

47. The endorsed Masterplan will become an important material consideration in the determination of any planning applications.

### **Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:**

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<sup>1</sup> A material consideration is a matter that should be taken into account in deciding a planning application or on an appeal against a planning decision.

48. The endorsed Masterplan will provide a clear and robust framework to support applications that seek to implement sustainable development whilst increasing environmental credentials across the Site. The Masterplan seeks to support the implementation of Local Plan policies which are designed to encourage and enable the delivery of sustainable development and in doing so support improvements for residents and businesses in the District in terms of health, wellbeing, air quality, placemaking, and economic and social mobility. This will contribute positively to the safe, cleaner, greener objectives of the Council.

**Consultation Undertaken:**

49. As detailed from paragraph 11 above and at Appendix 2 and Appendix 3.

**Risk Management:**

50. The Strategic Masterplan will support the Council's objectives of achieving high quality and sustainable design in the District and reduce the risk of poor quality development.

**Background Papers:**

- North Weald Airfield Strategic Masterplan January 2023 and accompanying Consultation Report
- Epping Forest District Local Plan 2011 - 2033

