

MATTER 20 – HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT

INTRODUCTION

1. Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation is a Community Benefit Society, which owns the freehold of the Letchworth Garden City Estate. It is successor to First Garden City Limited and the Letchworth Garden City Corporation and is subject to the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation Act 1995. We apply a basic principle of reinvesting surplus generated from a primarily commercial property portfolio back into the local community, by way of a series of charitable services and grant related activity. Our charitable commitments are set out in the 1995 Act.

Issue 20.1 - Are Policies SP13 and HE1 justified, effective and consistent with national policy?

2. We support the principles set out in Policies SP13 and HE1 and believe them to be justified. Despite this support, we are disappointed that the Policy included in the previous 'saved' Local Plan regarding Letchworth Garden City (Policy 58 - Letchworth Garden City Design Principles) is not part of the proposed Local Plan. The current adopted policy is provided at **Appendix A**.
3. We have therefore requested to participate in the examination on 27th November to discuss our concerns in more detail.
4. Reference is made by the Inspector to paragraph 132 of the NPPF, '*The more important the asset the greater the weight should be.*'
5. We believe that the world's first garden city is an important asset, which should have significant weight. The master plan for Letchworth Garden City is of international importance and the key core design aspects previously set out in the former Policy 58 are of importance when considering any new development in Letchworth.
6. There are a series of key attributes to this master plan, set out in the existing Policy 58 text (Appendix A), which are not naturally protected by the existing policy framework. The Council does not have an Article IV Direction to support the Conservation Area designation in order to preserve key components of existing buildings and the street scene and reliance on the preservation of these key attributes is often left the Heritage Foundation's Management Scheme, which is a landlord and tenant relationship, outside the statutory planning function.
7. Although some of the text from Policy 58 is included in the Design SPD, its absence from the statutory Local Plan, in the Design, Historic Environment and Letchworth Garden City Community Chapters, devalues the importance of Letchworth and its unique place in the story of British Town Planning.
8. In our view the existing reference to Letchworth in the Design SPD does not give sufficient weight to the importance of Letchworth's heritage context and how applications in Letchworth should be considered so not to harm its significance. This can include proposals for alterations to existing buildings as well as new development.

9. The Design SPD was adopted in 2011, before the NPPF. It includes a series of obsolete references and therefore requires revising in line with the current legislation. Overall, it lacks robustness as indicated in our previous written representations.

10. Para 126 of the NPPF states:

Local planning authorities should set out in their Local Plan a positive strategy for the conservation and enjoyment of the historic environment, including heritage assets most at risk through neglect, decay or other threats. In doing so, they should recognise that heritage assets are an irreplaceable resource and conserve them in a manner appropriate to their significance. In developing this strategy, local planning authorities should take into account:

- *the desirability of sustaining and enhancing the significance of heritage assets and putting them to viable uses consistent with their conservation;*
- *the wider social, cultural, economic and environmental benefits that conservation of the historic environment can bring;*
- *the desirability of new development making a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness; and*
- *opportunities to draw on the contribution made by the historic environment to the character of a place.*

11. It is our submission that this therefore requires a positive strategy with respect to the historic environment, which the retention of the Letchworth Garden City policy would achieve, by recognising its significance as a heritage asset and setting criteria for development within the heritage area of the Garden City.

12. It is therefore requested that a specific policy regarding Letchworth Garden City is reintroduced:

The Council will only consider development proposals in Letchworth if they meet Letchworth Garden City Design Principles, set out below.

13. This can then be followed by the previous Design Principles included in the Saved Local Plan provided at Appendix A.

14. This policy would seem to sit well within Section Four – Communities – Letchworth Garden City

APPENDIX A – POLICY 58 – CURRENT SAVED NORTH HERTS LOCAL PLAN

Policy 58: Letchworth Garden City Design Principles

The Council will only consider development proposals in Letchworth if they are in sympathy with the traditional buildings of Letchworth and if they clearly show that the Garden City Design Principles below have been taken into account.

Garden City Design Principles

1. For development proposals in Letchworth, their overall layout and design should, as far as practicable, reflect 'Garden City' layout and design principles. Creative reinterpretation of the principles in the light of modern requirements will be sought, and a knowledge of the quality and variety of early garden residential development in the Garden City is a pre-requisite to the success of any proposals. The following notes are intended to give a guide to examples which might be studied, with benefit.

2. The term 'Garden City' is equated with open residential development, characteristically low density and generously landscaped with mature trees and hedges set amongst individual houses. This is only partly true. Many of the finest early Garden City layouts depended on a successful corporate design for the scheme as a whole, in addition to the individual features mentioned above. The key to success in the best of examples quoted below is the appreciation of the way houses are grouped to form a sequence of outdoor spaces related to each other and to the overall setting.

3. The broadest overall effect is that of the **vista**. This has a formal quality exemplified by the broad tree-lined swathe which projects the main axis of the town across Norton Common, and was very effectively handled in the section of Broadway between the J.F. Kennedy Gardens and the Sollershotts where a double avenue of Lime trees was planted. Other principal approach roads of the town were treated in this manner, for example Norton Way South and Pixmore Way. In the latter, the articulated building lines of the early Letchworth U.D.C. Council housing was notably successful.

4. In contrast, the principle of **closure** represented the breaking down of the street picture into sequences by means of closing the view at key points, particularly at road junctions. Notable examples are the view southwards into Rushby Mead from Hillshott analysed in detail below; The Crescent between Pixmore Way and Baldock Road where a series of spaces is created along a curved road; or more formally, in Jackmans Place around the triple road junction where a focal block is set across the view line. The use of an informal design approach should not be at the expense of purposeful design of space framed by buildings, an aspect always emphasised by Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin, consultant architects for the original Letchworth Plan of 1904 and much of the subsequent detailed layout of housing.

5. Within the street picture, **accents** were often created by variations in the building line. For example, the splayed arrangement of the tree blocks of Silver Birch Cottages in Station Road added visual interest to an otherwise monotonous road. Greens were used to create a corporate sense of design, for example at Westholm, Ridge Road and in the section of Lytton Avenue between Gernon Road and Pixmore Way.

6. Finally, **group design** was used as a means of giving identity to the various roads within the Garden City. The residential cul-de-sac, was one of the earliest instances of the use of a feature which is now common in housing layouts. Other means of grouping include the linking together of blocks at street corners, as at the junction of Ridge Avenue and Hillshott, and the use of linking walls and garages as in the groups at the junction of Lytton Avenue

and South View. Occasionally, corners would be treated with blocks of striking design, for example the twin 'L' blocks which frame the north side of the junction between Sollershott East and Field Lane or the block boldly set diagonally across the acute angled junction between Sollershott East and South View.

7. In his classic book, *Town Planning in Practice*, published in 1909, Raymond Unwin stressed the importance of the architect and planner using the "main building lines and masses, placing any important features in his design, such as the terminal feature at the end of a road, or any buildings required to limit the size and give a sense of frame to the street picture". Unwin recognised the difficulty with predominantly detached houses, with a statement of design principles as relevant today as 75 years ago:

"With the square plot and the detached house in the centre of it the garden is necessarily cut up into several pieces of little practical value.... while the main garden has no single dimension large enough to develop any vista.....One of the greatest difficulties to be contended with is the constant multiplication of buildings too small in scale to produce individually any effect in the road... even where it is not possible to avoid much repetition of semi-detached or detached houses, they should be arranged to give some sense of grouping. The setting back of three or four pairs of houses in the arrangement of a continuous green in front of them, with the proper treatment of the houses at each end which are set forward against the building line, could of itself produce some grouping... hardly anything is more monotonous than the repetition of detached or semi-detached houses and this monotony is little relieved by variety in the individual houses... the variety is, as it were, unrelieved variety".

8. The detailed design, forms and materials used in Letchworth are also worthy of study. In 1904, First Garden City Ltd stated in its *Garden City Building Regulations* that "the high standard of beauty which they desire to attain in the Garden City can only result from simple, straight-forward building, and from the use of good and harmonious materials. They desire as far as possible to discourage useless ornamentation and secure that buildings shall be suitably designed for their purpose and position". As a result of this, such materials as rough cast brickwork and rich red tiled roofs became almost standardised, particularly for grouped housing whilst the use of slate as a roofing material was prohibited. Design features such as dormer windows and gables were accented with tile-hanging or dark stained boarding. Shortly before the First World War when the Georgian style became fashionable, dark red stock brick was effectively used with white painted wooden sash windows. The adoption of a steep roof pitch for most of the early houses and the variety and ingenuity of the handling of the gables, hips and dormers resulted in an overall variety without sacrificing the basic unit provided by the material.

9. Once again, Raymond Unwin provided guidance of continued relevance. He urged architects to "apportion materials with a view to some colour scheme. He will avoid monotony, not by an irregular jumble of materials and colours, but by a sufficient though unobtrusive variation in the different buildings, leading up to more definite breaks in colour in certain parts; treating differently different roads or parts of roads, and so producing interest and variety on his estate, which will be greatly helped by the sense of unity maintained in each individual part, and of harmony over the whole".

10. The landscaped setting, particularly tree planting, was regarded as an essential element of Garden City design and layout principles. The landscaping and greenswards of the housing areas became a unifying element and in particular the hedges of the house plots and the trees, shrubs and verges, carefully considered in relation to the highway, gave the whole town a park-like appearance befitting the name of Garden City. Examples already noted such as *Broadway* and *Rushby Mead* should be studied as examples where trees

predominate over buildings. In the town centre the contrast between street trees and more dominant buildings can also be seen.

11. The detailed analysis of the Rushby Mead housing scheme which follows demonstrates many of the design principles referred to above and this is supplemented by illustrative layouts.