



WELWYN GARDEN CITY SOCIETY

PRESS RELEASE

May 12th 2018

Welwyn Garden City Society again calls for major housing development adjacent to former landfill site at Holwell Hyde to be abandoned in light of recent peer review of previous land contamination surveys.



Images contain Environment Agency information © Environment Agency

The site known as Birchall Garden Suburb includes the former landfill site which operated between 1920-1990. As far back as 1929 there is evidence that the site received 40,000 tons per year of London's municipal waste.

Since 2015 WHBC and the site owner have been promoting this development of up to 2,550 new homes, an employment area, a school site and a country park as part of the Local Plan. Our key concerns are summarised below:

- The landowner provided WHBC with their own site surveys in 2014 although these were not placed in the public domain as part of the Local Plan process. The WGC Society obtained and analysed them, raising a number of concerns to WHBC on separate occasions, but these were ignored.

- Last year WHBC finally commissioned a peer review of these reports from LQM, a consultancy. The review was dated 11th October 2017. However, the existence of the peer review was kept under wraps and not disclosed until the Society made a formal Freedom Of Information request some months later asking to see any surveys WHBC had carried out on the site. As a result the peer review was not made public but its existence was referred to by name in a separate report by WHBC Environmental Health.
- The peer review report was requested at the government Planning Inspector's hearing into the viability of the proposed Birchall Garden Suburb site on January 30th 2018. However, WHBC declined to make it available at the hearing when requested by the Inspectors and other concerned stakeholders. None of the contamination survey reports have ever been part of any Local Plan consultation since 2009 as far as we are aware.
- The Society pursued obtaining the peer review through the Freedom of Information Act process and it was finally released at the end of April 2018, six months after it had been written and two months after the Inspector's hearing on the matter. The findings of the peer review clearly bears out the contamination concerns we had raised to WHBC two years earlier, but which fell on deaf ears.
- The peer review is clearly very relevant to any discussion on the viability of the site with regard to contaminated land, but it also reveals that other potential dangers that exist on parts of the site. You would think these should have given cause for concern. However, all appear to have been ignored. For example the peer review states:

"In general, we note that methane concentrations well above the upper explosive limit are recorded intermittently in the passive venting system. Such concentrations could pose an acute risk, particularly if the vents are close to ground level and accessible to the public."

"The available gas concentration data (particularly that in the existing venting system) confirms that significant concentrations of gas are still present within the landfill mass."

- The area referred to above is behind Thistle Grove and Little Thistle on the East side of Holwell Hyde Lane. The existing venting system has been in place for at least 20 years as far as is known.

Did the site owner report the possible acute risk to WHBC? Were the Environment Agency or DEFRA informed? Did, or could, these emissions present a risk to those living nearby? Have environmental/greenhouse gas emissions regulations been in breach now or in the past?



Some of the current ground gas vents at the northern end of the site

The peer review is enlightening in several areas making it key to any viability study of the proposed development. WHBC was happy to take the developers own 2014 survey reports at face value without challenging them, while the 2017 peer review says of them:

"Both reports are superficial and rely on a simplistic and naïve application of generic assessment criteria Little attempt to interrogate the contaminant data for spatial or depth correlations has been made."

In light of the above the Society would wish to have frank and meaningful answers to the following questions:

- 1) Why was the existence of the LQM peer review kept under wraps and not shared with the public or the Planning Inspectors? Who decided to adopt this approach?
- 2) Why have WHBC not acknowledged or engaged with residents or ourselves in response to any of the fears raised over contamination on the site?
- 3) How can the mitigation required be quantified let alone costed if the design of the final proposed development is still unknown?
- 4) Where is the long-term expert data that evidences the site could be safely developed?
- 6) Has the council had responsibility to monitor this site as per the Environmental Protection Act 1990: Part 2A Contaminated Land Statutory Guidance?
- 5) In recent weeks several new solar powered gas monitoring stations have been installed on the site close tot he vents. Who initiated this and for what purpose?
- 7) There has been no venting or monitoring across the southern ridge of the site. Vents were installed there many years ago but soon disappeared according to local residents. One broken vent remains. Is there a need to monitor this end of the former landfill?



Broken remaining vent pipe at the southern part of the site

We have also produced a further document which further explains our own view the process that has led to the current situation. This is titled *Development plan for the largest former landfill waste site in Hertfordshire*, this will be available on our website.

The Welwyn Garden City Society hopes and expects that these valid questions and concerns will be responded to by WHBC and those seeking to develop the site. The lack of response to our previous fears about development on this site has been far from satisfactory. We want to see all our points addressed and meaningful explanations given, especially regarding the decision not to make the public aware of the peer review and then not include it at all in Planning Inspector's hearing about the proposed development on the 30th January 2018. We would also expect WHBC to allay any fears those living nearby may have about the reported gas emissions. For all these outstanding reasons we think the site should be withdrawn from the Local Plan.

The photos given to us by the Environment Agency are available here:

<http://bit.do/colegreentip>

The LQM draft peer review is available here: <http://bit.do/lqmdraft>

Note that what is termed a draft report by LQM does not appear to be designated a draft document by LQM themselves. WHBC also didn't give LQM this Society's research paper on the former landfill which contained very relevant information and is available here: <http://bit.do/whatliesV2>

The Planning Inspector's hearing on the 30th January can be viewed here:

<http://welwyn.nucast.live/300118>

(Fast forward to 4hrs 15m 20s for request of unreleased peer review appendix).

The DEFRA document "Environmental Protection Act 1990: Part 2A Contaminated Land Statutory Guidance" is available here: <http://bit.do/epapart2A>

Welwyn Garden City Society, May 2018.

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