

Hertford's Green Fingers

1. Hertford is unusual. Four rivers with their associated wetlands penetrate the built-up area; but these Green Fingers extend beyond the boundaries of the town as homogeneous areas of high-quality landscape, each with its own common form and character. The presence of important species such as otter, water vole, crayfish, kingfisher, as many as a dozen species of dragonfly, and plants such as bladderwort and water violet, makes the areas immediately surrounding Hertford some of the most important wildlife sites in the County.
2. Hertford Civic Society published its first Green Fingers Report in 1976 advocating measures to protect these green fingers. Subsequently the local planning authority, East Herts Council, adopted the green finger concept in the Local Plan, identifying the boundaries of four fingers with a view to giving special consideration to any proposals for changes within these boundaries. The current adopted Local Plan notes in 12.6 that the green fingers are 'a priceless environmental asset to the town and have benefit to both local people and visitors alike'. The recognition of their importance is retained in the pre-submission version of the District Plan at 7.1.1, 7.1.12 and 7.5.3 where it is noted that 'The town's green infrastructure, particularly Hertford's Green Fingers which provide unique character to the settlement, will be maintained and enhanced, as appropriate' and 'Hertford's Green Fingers, which penetrate the town, are a recognised local amenity, wildlife and leisure asset and have been designated as Local Green Spaces under Policy CFLR2 (Local Green Space). This designation provides protection for these valuable resources and ensures that development will not be allowed in such locations, other than in very special circumstances.' This policy is reinforced in Chapter 20, Natural Environment.
3. In 2004 Hertford Civic Society published an update report on the green fingers. Its principal recommendations were that the boundaries of the green fingers should be expanded in order to create homogeneous areas of natural landscape without artificial

barriers and also greater restriction of development within those boundaries, coupled with action to enhance the benefit to the community. In the case of the West Street green finger the southern boundary would be pushed out to include Bayfordbury, a Grade Two park with leisure grounds. In this circumstance the proposed development of a retirement village would wholly fall within a green finger. In the Society's view the application should be considered against the report's recommendation.

4. If the proposal is to be considered in terms of the current Local Plan and the emerging District Plan it is evident that the access road serving the 'village' falls entirely within the green finger. It should be recognized that the proposal is for a 'retirement village', not a 'care home'. It can be expected that most of the residents will be able-bodied people capable of living a normal life but have chosen to live within a like-minded community. This will inevitably lead to increased traffic on the access road compared with what would be expected of a care home. Introducing significant traffic movements into a green finger and what is also designated as a wildlife site would be as damaging to the ambiance and the flora and fauna as permitting new building development. In the vicinity of the railway viaduct the access road would also interfere with the enjoyment of walkers and cyclists heading for and returning from the Cole Green Way; maintaining and enhancing the pleasure to be provided by the green finger is a major aim of planning policy.
5. We note that the Herts and Middx Wildlife Trust has objected to the proposal on the grounds that the applicant has neither undertaken a definitive survey of the ecological value of the site nor demonstrated how the development conserves and enhances biodiversity; a view that we fully endorse.
6. In conclusion this development would be very damaging to the green finger, whatever its boundary, and should not be considered as representing 'very special circumstances' under planning policies.