

Heritage Impact Assessment – November 2015 Land at Shephall Centre and adjacent amenity land

Introduction

As part of the evidence base to inform our Emerging Local Plan we have assessed a number of sites within the Strategic Land Availability Assessment (SLAA). The SLAA identifies sites that are suitable, available and achievable for development, in simplistic terms, without taking into account other policy considerations.

The site being considered for redevelopment is the Shephall Centre and its adjacent amenity land. The site currently accommodates a community centre. The landowner has submitted the site to us with a view to redeveloping it for residential use.

The site is partially located within the Shephall Green Conservation Area. As such, we need to ensure that any site allocation in the Local Plan follow the principles of sustainable development and are acceptable and appropriate in terms of their impact on the heritage assets.

Government Guidance¹ places great importance on the preservation and enhancement of heritage assets. It requires local authorities to 'set out a positive and clear strategy for the conservation, enjoyment and enhancement of the historic environment, in which the desirability of sustaining and enhancing the significance of heritage assets should be considered' (Para. 126). The associated statutory duties regarding the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of a conservation area and of preserving the setting of listed buildings must also be considered in this regard (Sections 66 and 72, Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990).

Both national policy, and best practice guidance published by Historic England², emphasise the importance of using an up-to-date evidence base to assess the significance of heritage assets, the contribution they make to the environment and the impact of any proposed development on these assets. Development proposals should seek to 'avoid or minimise conflict between any heritage asset's conservation and any aspect of the proposal' (NPPF, para. 129).

This Assessment aims to fulfil these requirements and to determine whether the potential development sites are appropriate, and what might be done to minimise the impacts of development on the heritage assets. Any residual harm to heritage assets would need to be balanced against the public benefits of the proposed development.

The emerging advice note from Historic England³ recognises that a positive strategy for the historic environment in Local Plans can ensure that site allocations avoid harming the significance of heritage assets, which includes effects on their setting. At the same time, it also recognises the allocation of sites for development may present opportunities for the historic environment.

¹ The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF, 2012)

² Historic England Advice Note. The Historic Environment and Site Allocations in Local Plans (Consultation Draft, June 2015); The Historic Environment in Local Plans. Historic Environment Good Practice Advice in Planning 1 (Historic England, March 2015)

³ Historic England Advice Note: The Historic Environment and Site Allocations in Local Plans (Consultation Draft, June 2015)

The advice note includes guidance specifically relating to site allocations for Local Plans. It sets out a methodology that local authorities can follow in order to ensure the historic environment is taken into account during the site selection process.

Five steps are identified, as follows:

STEP 1: Identify which heritage assets are affected by the potential site allocation

STEP 2: Understand what contribution the site (in its current form) makes to the significance of the heritage asset(s)

STEP 3: Identify what impact the allocation might have on that significance

STEP 4: Consider maximising enhancements and avoiding harm

STEP 5: Determine whether the proposed site allocation is appropriate in light of the NPPF's tests of soundness.

This methodology has been used as the basis for this assessment.

STEP 1: Heritage assets affected

The Shephall Centre and adjacent amenity land area is part of the wider Shephall Green Conservation Area, as shown in Map 1.

Map 1: Conservation Area boundary and the potential development area



A number of evidence studies relating to the Shephall Green Conservation Area already exist, and are in use by the Borough Council. The majority of these were produced by BEAMS, a specialist consultancy offering expertise in the historic environment across Hertfordshire in particular. This includes:

- A Review of Stevenage Conservation Areas, November 2005, BEAMS
- Shephall Green Conservation Area Appraisal, 2009, BEAMS
- Shephall Green Conservation Area Management Plan Supplementary Planning Document, 2012

The Borough Council chose to formally adopt the latter as a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) in 2012, making its guidance a material consideration when assessing planning applications.

These studies and reviews have formed the basis for this assessment, and should be referred to for further information on these heritage assets

The Conservation Area is located to the south east of Stevenage. Once an entirely separate parish and manor, the area is now located within the New Town neighbourhood of Shephall, constructed in 1953.

The conservation area is bounded by Hydean Way to the north and Broadhall Way to the south. The eastern edge includes the playing field boundaries of Barnwell School, and to the west, beyond the boundary, the Heathcote School playing fields.

The parish name was recorded as 'Escephale' in the Domesday Book of 1086 and the manor was owned by both the Abbot of St Albans Abbey and the Archbishop of Canterbury. The village developed around the church of St Marys which dates to the 14th century. St Albans Abbey gained eventual control of the manor of Shephall but, after King Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries, the manor was given to George Nodes. The manor remained in the Nodes family until the late 18th century when it was sold to Michael Heathcote of London.

The area developed as arable land, meadow and woodland with a small number of farms, cottages and ancillary facilities. These included a rectory, a public house and a school. The manor house was demolished and replaced by Shephalbury house, which lies outside of the conservation area boundary.

In 1947 the land around Shephall Green was compulsory purchased under the New Towns Act by the Stevenage Development Corporation. The Green was retained in its existing form and the New Town neighbourhood of Shephall developed around it. This included the Broadhall Centre⁴. Residential development occurred on the western side of the Green in the 1970's and 1980's.

The Shephall Green Conservation Area was designated in 1973 due to a range of designating strengths. The principal features of the Shephall Green Conservation Area are:

- The Green – a strong and unifying presence in the make up of Shephall Green;
- Wide verges and pathways;
- Mature trees and significant hedgerows;
- Cottage style front gardens;
- Statutory listed buildings and buildings considered to be of importance to the conservation area;
- Most properties face onto the Green;
- Consistent use of materials and design;
- Significant views and vistas into and out of the Green;
- Within an Area of Archaeological Significance.

⁴ Now known as the Shephall Centre

Significant/Listed Buildings

The appearance of the buildings in the area relates to their period of construction, however, most buildings are two storey dwellings and constructed in brick. There are four listed buildings in the area:

- Church of St Mary. Grade II*. 5/58. Listed 1948
- The Old Rectory. Grade II. 5/150. Listed 1976
- Shephalbury Farmhouse. Grade II. 5/60. Listed 1948
- 23 Shephall Green. Grade II. 5/10000. Listed 1993

The Conservation Area also contains a number of other features recognised for their importance to the area:

- Fullers Mead and Mead Cottage, 4 and 5 Shephall Green
- 6 Shephall Green
- 7 and 8 Shephall Green
- 9 Shephall Green
- 10 and 11 Shephall Green
- 12 and 13 Shephall Green
- The Red Lion Public House, 14 Shephall Green
- 15 and 16 Shephall Green
- 46 Shephall Green
- Barn north of Shephalbury Farmhouse

Open Spaces

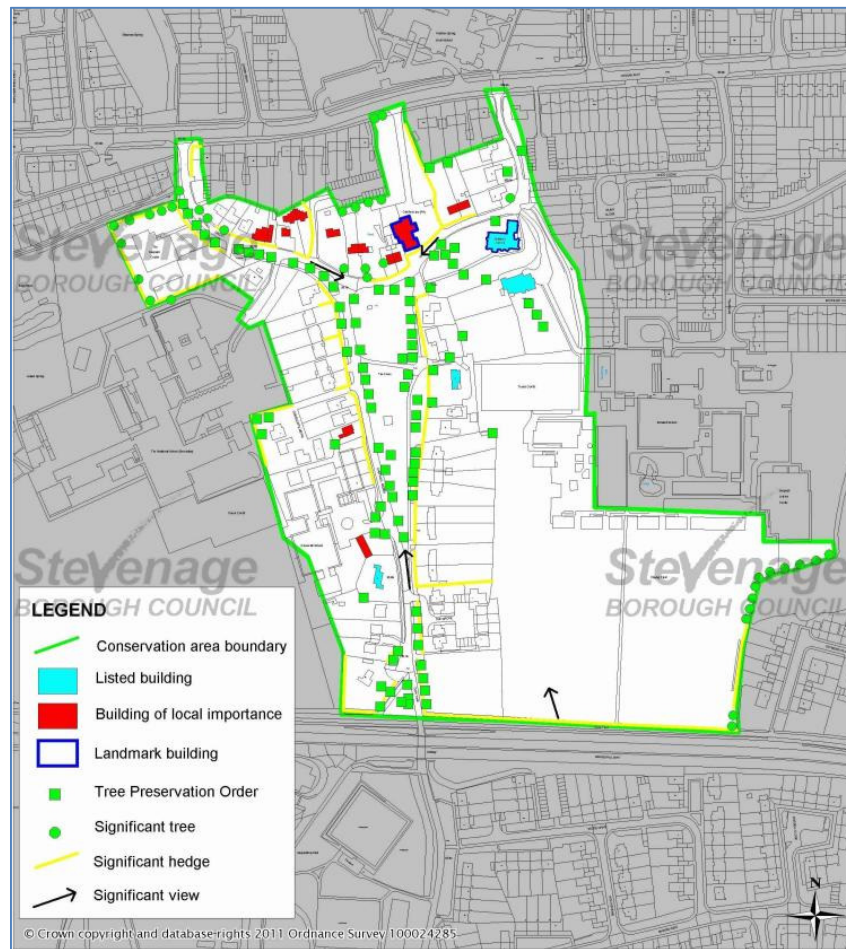
The Green is the principal focus and area of open space at the centre of Shephall Green Conservation Area. It helps to retain the rural, village-like feel of the area, which is a key element of its original character and appearance. The approaches into the green from all directions are dominated by views of the green with its many trees. The housing surrounding the triangular green helps to enclose the area. There is no through route for vehicular traffic, which also helps the area to retain its village setting.

The eastern edge of the conservation area includes the playing field of Barnwell School; its forms an important division between the houses along Shephall Green and the neighbourhood of Shephall.

Key Views

The key views identified within the conservation area are those looking into and out of the green from all directions. The high hedge along the southern boundary of the conservation area is a particularly noticeable and impressive feature when viewed from Broadhall Way.

Map 2: Shephall Green Conservation Area key features



STEP 2: The contribution of the site (in its current form) to the significance of the heritage asset(s)

The potential development site is located to the north west of the conservation area. It lies partly within the designated heritage asset, and partly outside.

The site contains, and is surrounded by, a number of significant trees, and lies opposite some buildings of local importance.

The Shephall Centre itself performs poorly in the architectural value that it contributes to the character of the conservation area. It was not designed to reflect the style of the surrounding properties. An unsympathetic building, such as the Shephall Centre, detracts from those features which make the area special.

Neither the site, nor the existing community building, is specifically mentioned within our previous evidence work as making any particular contribution to the conservation area, any significant buildings, or their settings.

It is clear that the conservation area was designated as such to ensure the architectural style and key features of the historic elements of the original Shephall Village are protected. The Shephall Centre sits juxtaposed to these historic features.



STEP 3: The impact the proposed allocation might have on that significance

Although it is at a relatively early stage, understanding the likely scope and key features of the proposed development will enable us to come to an informed view on its potential impact on the Conservation Area.

The most recent scheme submitted as part of the SLAA suggested that the site could accommodate around 34 new homes, as well as a replacement community facility, if required. Shephall Green would continue to provide access to the site.

Detailed elements of housing styles and materials have not been determined at this stage.

It is not considered that the loss of the existing building on this site would have a detrimental impact on the character or appearance of the conservation area. The community centre looks relatively tired and dated, and does not reflect the village-like style that the conservation area designation aims to preserve.

The open space included within the development site is also not recognised as being of any particular importance in terms of historical significance.

However, the site does sit in a prominent location towards the main vehicular entrance to the conservation area. It also lies opposite a number of locally significant buildings. As such, any development does have the potential to impact upon the character and appearance of the conservation area in more general terms.

STEP 4: Maximising enhancements and avoiding harm

Since the start of the Local Plan process, through the SLAA, we have investigated all of the potential sites we had submitted to us and all of those that we identified ourselves. The

results of the most recent SLAA provide us with a final list of suitable, available and achievable sites which could be allocated for housing within the Local Plan. Taking other evidence and policy requirements into account, such as the need for employment and retail provision, and the results of the SHMA and the Green Belt review, it is clear that there is a need to consider all development sites submitted to us if we are to meet our housing needs.

In accordance with the findings of stages 1 – 3 of this assessment, it is considered that development on this site could be delivered without significant negative impact to the Shephall Green Conservation Area, the Listed Buildings or their settings.

As well as ensuring heritage assets are protected, Historic England also recognise that the allocation of sites for development may present opportunities for the historic environment.

Our evidence recognises that the Conservation Area is in a generally well-kept condition, but it is suffering from the loss of (or poorly maintained) traditional architectural features. Specifically, the Shephall Centre has not dated well. It has become tired over the years, suffering from a lack of investment and improvement. The redevelopment of this site provides an opportunity to gain a new community facility for the residents, and to replace an unsympathetic building with new properties which more appropriately reflect the character and appearance of the heritage assets. Development also provides us with opportunities to gain developer contributions, which could be used to enhance existing features of the Conservation Area, if required.

In terms of minimising the impacts of new development, the following general principles should ensure minimal impacts on the heritage assets:

- The existing trees, hedgerows and natural screening currently in place should be maintained, and additional screening implemented, if required, to reduce the visual impact of the development.
- New development should front onto Shephall Green reflecting the existing layout across much of the conservation area.
- Tall buildings should not be permitted. Building heights across the site should be a maximum of two storeys.
- Building design should reflect the character of the existing properties, and the village-like feel of the area.

The draft Historic England advice note states that ‘site allocation policies are a positive feature of a Local Plan as they can highlight the specific criteria against which a development needs to be judged and thereby speed up the implementation process, providing clarity for a wide range of audiences’. The Local Plan should contain site specific considerations relating to the Shephall Centre, which set out the mitigation measures that will be required alongside any other site specific considerations.

STEP 5: Conclusion

This assessment recognises the importance of the Shephall Green Conservation Area as a significant heritage asset within the Borough. The proposed development site is located to the north west of this Conservation Area and currently accommodates the community centre.

The site is not identified as a key feature of the conservation area, and the tired state of the existing building means that redevelopment could provide an ideal opportunity for improvement and enhancement of the area as a whole.

Taking into account all of the evidence, it is considered that the development of this site could go ahead with very minimal impact upon the heritage assets. This would enable the

objectively assessed housing needs to be met, whilst also ensuring the development is sustainable and seeks to conserve the historic environment.

In order to further minimise the impact of such a scheme, site specific considerations in the Local Plan will be required to allocate the site, which should set out policy criteria to mitigate against the proposals and enhance the heritage assets, where possible.