

London Borough of Merton Local Plan Consultation – Written Representation

January 2021

1. Introduction and Background

- 1.1. St William is a joint venture between the Berkeley Group and National Grid Property ('National Grid'), which was formed in 2014. The partnership combines National Grid's extensive portfolio of surplus brownfield sites across London and the South East with the Berkeley Group's design expertise and proven track record of delivery to create high-quality residential and mixed use developments.
- 1.2. St William regenerates and transforms derelict former gasworks sites and as part of the Berkeley Group, our driving purpose is to create high quality homes, strengthen communities and improve people's lives through fantastic placemaking. The pandemic restrictions have further highlighted the importance on the quality of homes and their surrounding spaces, ensuring that they are sustainable, inclusive to all and accessible to local amenities and key social infrastructure.
- 1.3. Former industrial sites have a critical role to play in the delivery of needed homes in London. The draft London Plan identifies former utilities sites (including gasworks) as a strategic brownfield source to deliver housing, reflecting the NPPF's emphasis on making the most effective and efficient use of brownfield land for housing supply.
- 1.4. Since the formation of the JV, St William has been granted planning approval for 13 former gasworks sites. These consents cross London include Leven Road Gasworks (2,800 homes), Battersea Gasworks (955 homes), Clarendon Gasworks (1,714 homes) and Fulham Gasworks (1,843 homes).
- 1.5. Bringing forward these former gasworks sites for the delivery of homes is very challenging as they are technically very complex, it involves significant (often upfront) levels of investment and comes with high developer risk; very few developers have the capacity, expertise or risk appetite to regenerate such sites.
- 1.6. As part of the JV, St William have an interest in the former Mitcham Gasworks site located at Western Road in Mitcham. The site is 2.4 hectares, is located 0.2 miles to the north of Mitcham town centre and 0.7 miles west of Mitcham Eastfields station in a predominantly residential area. In the northern area of the site there is a large steel gasholder for which, prior approval has been granted to demolish the structure. The site is a vacant, brownfield gasworks site, which, in line with the NPPF, is suitable and available for housing delivery and is able to contribute to the Council's housing targets and the good growth objectives as set out in the draft Local Plan.
- 1.7. St William have been in discussion with Merton Council regarding the redevelopment of the gasholders site and have responded to previous consultations of the draft Local Plan accordingly. From these discussions, it has been acknowledged that the site provides a key opportunity to bring forward housing and would contribute to the regeneration of the area. It was also acknowledged that, being a former gasholder site, viability will be challenging and a consideration for any scheme going forward. St William look forward to continue to work in partnership with the Council for the regeneration of this site.

- 1.8. It is likely that the conclusion of contractual matters between National Grid and St William will occur in March 2021 with consideration for submission of an application for Planning Permission towards the end of 2021. Subject to the time needed for the planning application to progress to determination, a start on the redevelopment of the site could be achieved by the summer/autumn of 2022. Based on this programme, the first new homes could be ready for occupation towards the end of 2023, within the first 5 years of the adopted plan period.
- 1.9. St Williams's overarching principles for all of their former gasworks sites are generally aligned with the draft Local Plan's good growth strategy and will help to deliver a number of draft policy objectives of the Plan, including:
- Achieving strong and resilient, sustainable communities
 - Making the most of limited land available
 - Increasing supply of high quality new homes to meet the needs of Merton's diverse communities.
 - Moving towards low/zero, by minimising the demand for energy and promoting renewable and low carbon technologies.
 - Supporting future jobs market by creating opportunities for training, apprenticeships or qualification opportunities for local communities
 - tackle health inequalities and promote healthy living
 - Increasing safety and security
 - Promote exemplary standards of design in place-making and the highest quality of development.

2. Representation

- 2.1. St William welcomes the opportunity to work with the London Borough of Merton (LBM) as it undertakes further consultation on its draft Local Plan 2020. It should be noted that these representations are made solely on behalf of St William, notwithstanding any representations made by other divisions of the Berkeley Group or National Grid.
- 2.2. As a broad observation we welcome the Council's ambitions for good growth, the spatial strategy and the Council's aims to ensure that the growth is sustainably balanced. As the Plan is taken forward, it will need to reflect any changes as set out in the Publication Version of the draft Local Plan (2020), this will be to ensure compliance and that the LBM Local Plan can be found 'sound' at Examination stage.

Good Growth Strategy

- 2.3. The Council's aim to create conditions for '*growth that delivers opportunities and benefits for local communities*' is supported. The Council's policy intention '*to ensure the most efficient use is made of Merton's limited land*' whilst seeking to improve the quality of the environment is also supported. In taking this forward, it will be important for the Plan to maintain flexibility and promote design led masterplans to not only deliver good growth, but also to ensure the draft policy aim of making the best use of limited land is met, enabling optimised masterplans to come forward and deliver homes.
- 2.4. The Council's draft policy objective to create '*20-minute neighbourhoods*' is welcomed; the former Mitcham Gasworks site has the opportunity to create homes that promote this aim; it has access to safe cycling and walking routes (with western Road proposed

as a strategic cycling route), is located within close proximity to local public transport, local health facilities, parks and other services and infrastructure. The former gasworks site would play a strategic role in the creation of a 20 minute neighbourhood within the North Mitcham local centre.

- 2.5. We acknowledge that the broad locations of Merton's growth areas (namely the Wimbledon/Colliers Wood/South Wimbledon Opportunity Area (OA) and Morden town centre) are aligned with the London Plan; however, the draft plan states '*Outside the growth areas smaller scale development and more incremental change will take place*'. In line with the Council's strategic objectives '*ensuring that development makes the most efficient use of brownfield land and that is designed at the optimum density, considering site context*', the draft Plan needs to make it clear that strategic sites located outside of these areas can make a significant contribution to growth and regeneration, and as such, should adopt a design led approach that seeks to optimise housing delivery whilst delivering high quality placemaking. This approach reflects the draft London Plan and the Mayor's objectives for Good Growth.

Housing Numbers

- 2.6. The draft Plan states that 13,263 additional homes are to be delivered for the period 2020/21 to 2034/35 which equates to 884 homes per year, for the 15 year timeframe of the Plan.
- 2.7. It is noted that, the draft plan makes reference to Intend to Publish London Plan housing targets, which, increases the Council's target to 9,180 homes over ten years, averaged at 918 homes per year; however, the draft Plan provides no clarification on the Council's 5 year housing land supply or local SHLAA and therefore, there is confusion from where the 884 figure is derived.
- 2.8. It has been made evident from the draft London Plan examination process and Inspectors Report that Boroughs should seek to deliver more homes than those set out in draft London Plan, as current regional figures of circa 52,000 do not truly reflect London's need. In addition, following the Government's response to its consultation on an updated standard method of assessing housing need (October 2020), it has been indicated that London Housing Need figures are likely to increase by 35% with imposed methodology changes, with the aim of boosting housing supply quickly to deliver a new national total of 337,000 homes a year (compared to the 270,000 under the current methodology approach).
- 2.9. If the new approach is taken forward by Government, the annual housing requirement for LBM would increase to 1,193 homes per annum, equating to 17,905 across the Plan period and would need to be considered if the Plan was to be found 'sound'. As the Plan is taken forward, the word 'minimum' should be included in draft policy H4.2 'Housing Provision' to ensure longevity of plan and to provide accordance with regional and national policy.
- 2.10. St William supports the Council's draft policy intentions to support the provision of well-designed new homes that create socially mixed and sustainable neighbourhoods and we particularly welcome draft policy H4.2 (c) that seeks to support the delivery of well-designed new homes which optimise levels of residential density in accordance with the design-led approach set out in the London Plan Policy D6 and Merton's design code guidance.

Affordable Housing

- 2.11. St William support the strategic objective of ensuring a significant increase in the supply, choice and mix of high quality new homes, in particular delivering genuinely affordable homes.
- 2.12. Draft policy H4.1 'Housing Choice' sets out a strategic target of 50% of new homes to be affordable. The table under point 'F' of the policy requires sites a minimum of 40% affordable housing for all sites that are not on public sector land or industrial land. This does not follow the Mayor's draft affordable housing policy (H5) and the 'Threshold Approach' to affordable housing and therefore should be revised to be in line with the London Plan.
- 2.13. Former Gasworks sites are unique in both use and character; they are challenging and abnormally expensive to regenerate compared to delivery of development on other brownfield sites; they can also have ongoing operational requirements requiring physical infrastructure and easements which can considerably reduce the developable site area. The further challenge for any developer on these typically complex sites is the quantum of upfront costs required to make the sites adequate for residential delivery. The specific viability challenges to bring former utility sites forward needs to be carefully balanced to ensure these redundant brownfield sites fulfil their potential and contribute to an areas housing need.
- 2.14. Notwithstanding the need for draft policy H4.1 to be in line with the London Plan, Merton's draft policy and supporting text going forward will need to reflect footnote 59 and paragraph 4.5.7 of the draft Publication London Plan (2020) which highlights the unique challenges of former utility sites; it recognises that *'some surplus utilities sites are subject to substantial decontamination, enabling and remediation costs. If it is robustly demonstrated that extraordinary decontamination, enabling or remediation costs must be incurred to bring a surplus utilities site forward for development, then a 35% housing threshold could be applied, subject to detailed evidence, including viability evidence, being made available'*
- 2.15. So that the LBM draft Local Plan can be found in accordance with the draft London Plan **and** to be deemed as 'sound', text from draft London Plan footnote 59 should be referenced and included as part of draft Local Plan policy H4.1. Given the unusual characteristics of former gasworks sites, St William welcome further discussion and engagement with the Council on this basis and would be happy to provide further input and evidence to be considered.

Site Allocation Mi16 – Former Mitcham Gasworks, Western Road, CR4.

- 2.16. The draft Plan's spatial strategy, good growth strategy and objectives makes it clear that, although outside the designated growth areas, the strategy for Mitcham includes *'making more efficient and intensive use of land, taking opportunities to provide a mix of uses, including new housing and employment floor space'*.
- 2.17. Whilst St William support the general principles of draft policy N3.2, it needs to be more aligned with the Plan's strategic objectives and emphasise that the most efficient use should be made of the brownfield strategic sites in the sub area, which are valuable to bringing forward new homes and meeting the Council's housing targets.

- 2.18. The former Mitcham gasworks site is contained within Site Allocation Mi16. As currently indicated, the former gasholder and its immediate surrounding land (located to the north of the site) is not included within the site allocation and the gasholder is currently highlighted to be a constraint, which is a significant error in the draft Plan. Given the housing need in Merton and given the lack of strategic/large sites available, it is imperative that the additional 0.55ha of gasholder land is included to make the best use of brownfield land for optimised housing delivery.
- 2.19. This piece of vacant land forms part of the wider historic gasworks site and as such, was included within the wider site as identified in the adopted Former Mitcham Gas Depot Planning Brief SPD (2005). As part of informal and on-going discussion with the Council, it has been made clear that the Gasholder area should be included in the Mi16 Site Allocation. An application for the demolition of the gasholder was made in February 2020 and on 20th March 2020 the Council issued a decision notice that confirmed Prior Approval was not required. It is not clear why the gasholder remains outside of the Allocation and wish to object to this element of the draft Local Plan until this correction is made and associated text is amended accordingly. We welcome further discussion with the Council and will assist in any information needed.
- 2.20. The principle of residential led mixed-use development with open space and community use (Clinics, health centres, crèches, day nurseries, day centre) is generally supported although clarity needs to be given in relation to the reference for additional play space as well as open space as set out in the design and accessibility guidance element of the Allocation.
- 2.21. As has already been explained, when bringing former gasworks sites forward, the complexities and significant costs associated with development of these sites compared to other brownfield sites creates the need to carefully balance any Site Allocation requirements against specific viability challenges so that their full potential for housing delivery can be realised. This will need to be considered and referenced as the Site Allocation policy is progressed.
- 2.22. The PTAL reference given in Mi16 is PTAL 4 which is incorrect; the site is predominantly PTAL 3 with the area to the south west of the site being PTAL 2. The accessibility level will fundamentally impact on design considerations such as quantum of car parking and infrastructure contributions. This inaccurate reference must be corrected as the Plan is taken forward to the next plan making stage.
- 2.23. St William would like to take this opportunity and highlight its commitment to working in partnership with the Council in bringing this site forward for the delivery of homes and we wish to work more proactively with the Council going forward to establish the correct policy framework in which to bring an application forward within the next 2 years. In doing so, we would be interested in further discussion relating to preparing an updated SPD for the site, if required.

Places and Spaces in a Growing Borough

- 2.24. As part of the Berkeley Group, St William places great emphasis on high quality design and placemaking; we create bespoke, design led masterplans which are designed in collaboration with local stakeholders and follow good principles of urban design. For larger regeneration schemes, often an innovative and bespoke approach is needed for a site to realise its full potential and deliver high quality placemaking.

Inflexible rules based policies can be overly restrictive and can hinder the delivery of innovative design solutions.

- 2.25. Whilst we generally support the proposed design policies contained in the '*Places and Spaces in a Growing Borough*' Chapter, the reference to tall buildings in draft Strategic Policy LP D5.1 makes it clear that tall buildings (defined to be 6 storeys or more) will only be permitted within Colliers Wood town centre, Wimbledon town centre and the Wider Morden Town Centre Area. This rigid approach will restrict the innovative design for larger strategic sites located across the borough (outside of these areas) and will prohibit the most efficient use of brownfield sites such as the former gasworks; given its context, the size of the site and its location close to public transport, Mitcham centre and associated services, accommodating a taller element on the site will be fundamental to the design-led approach to maximising the yield from development. Draft policy LP D5.1 should be amended so that tall buildings could be permitted in other areas subject to design led masterplans and townscape impact analysis.

Health and Well Being

- 2.26. We fully support the council's objective to improve the health and well-being of all who live and work in the borough. St William, as part of the Berkeley Group, understands that the planning framework is a powerful tool for creating places that will play a vital role in the health and wellbeing of communities.

Climate Change

- 2.27. Berkeley has long recognised the importance of reducing carbon emissions to minimise climate change and have adapted our business to help ensure that the homes we create remain resilient to changes in temperatures. As well as focusing on efficiencies, we are now going beyond Government requirements by compiling a zero carbon transition plan for each new development to enable the homes to operate at net zero carbon by 2030. This is to ensure we incorporate the right long term infrastructure into our developments. We therefore support the Councils intentions to ensure the Local Plan plays a role in mitigating and adapting to climate change and maximising environmental benefits.
- 2.28. Notwithstanding this, climate change policies should be outcome focussed - the overly prescriptive energy policies as currently set out can limit freedom to deliver the most suitable and effective long term carbon/sustainable strategies for a site. On this basis policies 87 and 88 need to include wording to allow for a level of flexibility, so that the most appropriate solutions can be delivered on a site by site basis, ensuring the optimum reduction in carbon emissions is reached.

Transport and Urban Mobility

- 2.29. Draft policy T6.4 'Improving Travel Choices' repeats many of the policy objectives to meet the Council's carbon reduction objective of becoming net-zero carbon by 2050 as set out in draft policy CC8.10 – only one policy is needed to set out these requirements in the Local Plan.
- 2.30. St William welcome the approach to adopt 'Healthy Streets' as endorsed by TfL as identified in draft policy T6.5 'Prioritising Walking'

Summary

- 2.31. Once again St William welcomes the opportunity to submit representations to the Merton draft Local Plan. As the Plan is taken forward it will be essential that St William are given the full opportunity to engage further with the Council, particularly in regard to Site Allocation Mi.14.
- 2.32. St William trust these representations will be duly considered as the Plan is progressed and we hope these comments help in securing a sound Plan for the Borough.