

Dacorum Borough Council Core Strategy Examination in Public 2012

AMEC on behalf of The Crown Estate (ID: 211068)

Hearing Session: Tuesday 9 October 2012 14.00

Issue 2: Distribution of development (settlement hierarchy) and the Green Belt.

Question 2.4 Have the proposed amendments to the green belt boundary been properly justified and has the Council's approach heeded national guidance? What are the exceptional circumstances that exist to justify such revisions?

1. Paragraph 83 of NPPF states that Green Belt Boundaries 'should only be altered in exceptional circumstances through the preparation and review of the Local Plan.' It is considered in light of the significant housing and employment need in the Borough in the current plan period and beyond (see our response to issues 5 and 6), that exceptional circumstances exist for revisions to the Green Belt. However, the Core Strategy is considered to be unsound in that the evidence base in relation to the Green Belt is not robust and does not fully justify the Council's preferred strategy in respect of revisions to the Green Belt. No robust assessment has been undertaken to assess whether the proposed locations for growth are the most appropriate in terms of the potential impacts on the Green Belt.
2. The Council's approach does not meet the requirements of NPPF (Section 9) in this respect. It is considered that the Core Strategy fails the tests of justified, effective and consistency with national guidance due to the lack of a thorough Green Belt review. In order to be found sound it is considered that a full Green Belt review should be undertaken considering all alternative development options. Given the proximity of the boundary between St Albans and Dacorum districts, this should be a joint study to underpin both emerging Core Strategies.
3. In the absence of a comprehensive review of the Green Belt, it is not considered that the proposed settlement strategy has been properly assessed or justified in terms of the requirements of NPPF (Section 9). In particular the Core Strategy has failed to address the points listed below:
 - **The Core Strategy has not fully justified what exceptional circumstances there are to account for revisions to the Green Belt boundaries (as required by Paragraph 83 of NPPF).**
4. Paragraph 8.28 of the Pre-Submission Core Strategy (SUB1) states that a strategic review of Green Belt boundaries is not required; although it notes some 'small scale' releases will be necessary to meet specific local needs or to correct minor anomalies. Whilst a strategic review of Green Belt boundaries would not be required for correcting anomalies or for small scale releases, the Core Strategy identifies local allocations at West Hemel Hempstead (up to 900 dwellings) and Marchmont Farm (300 dwellings) which are both located in the

Green Belt. These, and in particular the former, are considered to be more than just small scale releases and are of a scale of potential strategic importance to the purposes of including land within the Green Belt.

5. Paragraph 158 of NPPF requires that Local Plans are prepared on the basis of an '*adequate, up-to-date, and relevant evidence base about the economic, social and environmental characteristics and prospects of the area.*' Accordingly, given the extent of the Green Belt in the Borough, a Green Belt review and assessment of the settlement boundaries should have been undertaken prior to the submission of the Core Strategy as it is of fundamental importance to the Spatial Strategy.
6. It is recognised that the Assessment of Local Allocations and Strategic Sites documents (SA9) considers 'Green Belt impact' as Stage 2 in its assessment, but this only considers those sites that have not been discounted at previous stages. This does not provide a sound basis for the Core Strategy. In order to be found sound, a strategic review of the Green Belt should have been undertaken to identify the contribution that different locations make to the five Green Belt purposes as set out in paragraph 80 of NPPF and to inform the Spatial Strategy and the allocation of strategic sites.
7. A Green Belt review is a fundamental part of the evidence base and should have been undertaken at an early stage rather than seeking to justify the preferred strategy once it had been formed. Cheltenham Borough Council, Tewkesbury Borough Council and Gloucester City Council recently undertook a Strategic Green Belt Assessment to form part of the Joint Core Strategy evidence base¹. This provided a qualitative Green Belt assessment specifically focussing on an assessment against the five purposes of including land in the Green Belt as set out in NPPF. This assessment made recommendations as to how strategic segments of the Green Belt perform against each of the purposes of including land in the Green Belt to identify areas that make less of a contribution than others. We are also aware that Stevenage Council is currently undertaking a Green Belt review which includes land in neighbouring Districts.
8. Dacorum Borough Council should undertake a joint review with St. Albans given the tightly drawn Green Belt boundary around Hemel Hempstead (see our response to Issue 1 and the duty to co-operate with neighbouring authorities). The review should consider the need to ensure that boundaries do not need to be revised within the plan period or in the period beyond. This evidence needs to be considered along with other evidence relating to the sustainability of sites, landscape sensitivity and development requirements on Green Belt sites before the Core Strategy can identify larger Green Belt sites (referred to in the Core Strategy as local allocations) for development. This would accord with the need for decisions to be evidence based as set out in paragraph 158 of NPPF.
9. Following a review of the Green Belt, boundary changes should be fully justified and in line with guidance in NPPF (paragraph 85) new boundaries should be clearly defined using '*physical features that are readily recognisable and likely to be permanent.*' It is considered that when a comprehensive Green Belt review is undertaken it will highlight the sensitive nature of the Green Belt at west Hemel Hempstead and that there are other locations such as east Hemel Hempstead which are much less sensitive in Green Belt terms, with robust long

¹ Tewkesbury Borough Council, Gloucester City Council, Cheltenham Borough Council Joint Core Strategy Green Belt Assessment (June 2011)

term boundaries and which make a limited contribution to the five Green Belt purposes set out in NPPF (see our response to question 2.5).

10. In recent cases Inspectors have suspended examinations of Local Plans on the basis of an incomplete evidence base, including the lack of a Green Belt review. In considering the Bath and North East Somerset Core Strategy examination documents (June 2012) the inspector concluded:

“There is no up-to-date and comprehensive review of the Green Belt in the district to see whether all the land so designated fulfils clear Green Belt purposes; the degree of significance which should be attached to various parts of the Green Belt; or the extent to which some development in the Green Belt would promote sustainable patterns of development.”

- **There is no apparent consistency with the Local Plan for meeting identified requirements for sustainable development (paragraph 85 of NPPF).**

11. NPPF requires that Local Plans are prepared to deliver the three dimensions of sustainable development outlined in paragraph 7 (these include meeting housing and economic development needs). Accordingly, in line with paragraph 85 of NPPF, Green Belt boundaries should be reviewed with a consideration of how sustainable development needs will be met.

12. As outlined in our response to Issue 6 it is considered that the rate of housing growth in the Core Strategy will not be sufficient to meet housing needs in the Borough over the Plan Period. In addition, the Core Strategy has not robustly considered the long term requirements for employment land over the Plan Period to 2031 (see our response to Issue 5). No account has been taken of how longer term development needs over the plan period could impact on revisions to the Green Belt boundaries. The Council’s statement ‘*Selecting the Core Strategy Housing Target*’ (HG16) paragraph 5.5 states:

“It is difficult to see how full demand (for housing) can be achieved satisfactorily given the Green Belt and other environmental constraints of the Borough.”

13. The presence of the Green Belt should be considered as part of a review in the context of housing and employment needs. This approach was supported in the Inspector’s report to the Hertsmeire Core strategy (paragraph 14). Instead, as part of a suite of evidence base documents, a Green Belt review should inform how the proposed rate of growth can be delivered in the borough taking into account which areas of land make the least contribution to the purposes of including land within the Green Belt and other sustainability criteria. Without a consideration of the longer term development requirements it is unclear how the Green Belt boundaries are capable of endurance beyond the plan period (see response to question 2.5 below).

- **The Council has not considered how the release of Green Belt land will impact on sustainable patterns of development (as required by paragraph 84 of NPPF).**

14. NPPF Paragraph 84 advises that when reviewing Green Belt boundaries local planning authorities should also consider what impacts the revision of Green Belt boundaries would have on the promotion of sustainable patterns of development. The main employment area in the town is to the east (Maylands). Therefore the release of land at East Hemel Hempstead is likely to provide the most sustainable location for Green Belt release.

15. The preliminary findings of the St. Albans Proactive Green Belt study as reported in the St. Albans Planning Policy Advisory Meeting Agenda of 16 September 2010² indicate that the land at North East Hemel Hempstead scores well in terms of sustainability for release from the Green Belt.

Question 2.5 Paragraph 83 of the National Planning Policy Framework refers to the permanence of the green belt in the long-term so that they should be capable of enduring beyond the plan period and paragraph 85 refers to the identification of safeguarded land. How does the Core Strategy address the possible need to safeguard land? Should a review of the complete green belt boundary have been undertaken, including an assessment of whether or not there are any major developed sites (other than those in Table 2) that should be identified? Can the Council be confident that the green belt boundary will not have to be altered at the end of the plan period?

16. As outlined in our response to question 2.4 above the Core Strategy is considered to be unsound in that the evidence base in relation to the Green Belt is not robust and does not meet the requirements of NPPF (Section 9). A review of Green Belt boundaries is required in order for the plan to be found sound. This will need to account for longer term development needs beyond the plan period and the need for safeguarding land which the Council have so far failed to do. The Core Strategy does not meet the requirements of NPPF in the following respects:

- **The Green Belt boundaries are not capable of endurance beyond the Plan Period.**

17. Paragraph 83 of NPPF states that through a review of a Local Plan, regard should be given to Green Belt boundaries and *'their intended permanence in the long term so that they are capable of endurance beyond the plan period.'*
18. As stated in our response to question 2.4, it is considered that insufficient land for development has been identified in the Core Strategy to meet housing needs (also see our response to issue 6). It is considered that the Core Strategy will not meet the objectively assessed needs for market and affordable housing. The Council is currently planning to deliver 430 new homes each year through Policy CS17. This is significantly lower than the Government's 2008-based household projections which show a need for 520 dwellings per annum (13,000 households 2008-2033). In addition, the Core Strategy is unlikely to meet longer term employment growth needs (see our response to issue 5).
19. Given that the Plan will not meet the identified housing and employment needs of the Borough it is clear that without a full and robust review of the Green Belt in the Borough, it is not considered that the plan is capable of endurance beyond the plan period.
20. An Inspector suspended the South Gloucestershire Core Strategy Examination (in 2012) to enable the local planning authority to undertake further work including a full Green Belt assessment. The Inspector's view was that changes to the Green Belt need to be taken in the context of an overall understanding of the future role of the Green Belt in the area and that full assessment is required so that there is no need to change boundaries during the remainder of the plan period or for a reasonable period beyond. The same circumstances apply in Dacorum.

² Core Strategy: Housing Targets and Spatial Strategy paper considered at St Albans Planning Policy Advisory Panel 16 September 2010 (below paragraph 7.3).

- **To be found sound the Plan will need to consider the need for safeguarding land to avoid further revisions to the Green Belt, beyond the current plan period.**
21. Paragraph 85 of NPPF also encourages local planning authorities to, where necessary, safeguard land between the urban area and the in order to *'meet long term development needs stretching well beyond the plan period'*.
 22. In the absence of a robust Green Belt Review, the Core Strategy has failed to identify whether any land is required to be safeguarded taking into account longer term development needs. The Crown Estate has in the past promoted an urban extension to the East of Hemel Hempstead. See submission document reference OT10 'Proposed Development at Gorhambury: Hemel Hempstead East'. This development is referred to in the document as the 'Gorhambury Concept' (see also the Gorhambury Concept Position Statement submitted with our response to issue 1). The Concept has been identified over many years to accommodate major expansion of Hemel Hempstead to meet current and future development needs. Smaller options are also available in the northern and southern neighbourhoods.
 23. The Council's evidence base points towards the East of Hemel Hempstead being the focus of development in the current plan period and beyond. The Employment land Update report (reference ED12) states that greenfield land to the east of Maylands within St Albans, whilst not required in the current plan period, could be required when the target is revised in five years. Given that the plan covers the period through to 2031 it is appropriate to identify this area of land as a location for employment over the life of the plan. In addition, the East Hemel Hempstead Area Action Plan Issues and Options Paper (AA1), page 5 states that:

"East Hemel Hempstead is the focus of the town and Borough's economic activity and as such it is logical that future employment provision is concentrated on this side of town."
 24. It is clear that East Hemel Hempstead is likely to be the focus of development in the foreseeable future; therefore, the Green Belt review should have considered this location and the requirement to safeguard land for future development needs in this location.
 25. NPPF, paragraph 85 states that when boundaries need revising consideration should be given to defining boundaries using physical features which are readily recognisable and likely to be permanent. The M1 to the east of Hemel Hempstead provides a long term defensible boundary to the expansion of the town. Land should be safeguarded in order to meet long term development needs between Hemel Hempstead and the M1. This approach would avoid the incremental and piecemeal erosion of the Green Belt as would be provided by the current spatial strategy contrary to advice contained in NPPF.

Question 2.6 How and when will settlement boundaries be reviewed?

26. In line with our responses to questions 2.4 and 2.5, the Core Strategy should be found unsound in the absence of a full Green Belt Review. In order to provide a robust evidence base and meet the requirements of NPPF, a Green Belt assessment needs to cover the whole area around Hemel Hempstead including land in adjoining authorities (namely St Albans City and District).

Summary to Issue 2

What part of the Core Strategy is unsound?

27. The Core Strategy is considered to be unsound in that the evidence base in relation to the Green Belt is not robust and does not meet the following requirements of NPPF (Section 9):

- The Core Strategy has not addressed what exceptional circumstances there are to justify revisions to the Green Belt boundaries (Paragraph 83);
- No regard has been given to the long term implications of Green Belt revisions and their endurance beyond the plan period (Paragraph 84);
- The Core Strategy has not considered the requirement for safeguarding land to meet longer term development needs beyond the plan period (Paragraph 85); and
- No consideration has been given as to how the release of Green Belt land will impact on sustainable patterns of development (paragraph 85).

Which test of soundness it fails?

28. It is considered that the Core Strategy fails the tests of justified, effective and consistency with national guidance in respect of the lack of a thorough Green Belt review.

Why it fails

29. No robust assessment has been undertaken to assess whether the proposed locations for growth are the most appropriate in terms of the potential impact of the Green Belt. In the absence of a comprehensive review of the Green Belt, it is not considered that the proposed settlement strategy has been properly assessed or justified in terms of the requirements of NPPF (Section 9).

The precise change and/or wording sought

30. A full assessment of the proposed revisions to the Green Belt should be undertaken in order for the Core Strategy to be found sound to ensure that the adopted plan is effective, justified and consistent with national policy (paragraph 182 of NPPF).

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