

Dacorum Borough Council Core Strategy Examination in Public 2012

AMEC on behalf of Trustees of Piers Williams (ID: 502504)

Hearing Session and Issue: Tuesday 9 October 2012 14.00 Issue 2: the distribution of development (settlement hierarchy) and the Green Belt.

WRITTEN SUBMISSION

Context

This Position Statement is in response to questions raised by the Inspector which are considered relevant to our client's land interests at Station Road, Tring under Issue 2 Question(s) 2.4, 2.5 and 2.6.

Issue 2: The 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?

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.' 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.

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 consistent 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.

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).**

Paragraph 8.28 of the Submission Core Strategy 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 a proposed allocation at Ickneild Way, Tring (150 homes) in the Green Belt. This is considered to be more than just a small scale release and is of a scale of potential strategic importance to the purposes of including land within the Green Belt.

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.

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 base. 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.

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.

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).**

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.

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. 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'* (June 2012) 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.”

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 Hertsmere 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).**

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. This does not appear to have been undertaken.

Our client owns a 1.5 hectare area of land located on Station Road, Tring. The site is well located on the eastern edge of the town being roughly equidistant to the town centre and the station. The location would provide a sustainable location for new development which would promote sustainable transport choices (see our response to Issue 12). The release of our client’s land at Station Road, Tring would accord with this guidance.

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?

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.**

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.*’

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). Given that the Plan will not meet the identified housing 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.

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 this case.

- **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.**

Paragraph 85 of NPPF also encourages local planning authorities, where necessary, to safeguard land between the urban area and the in order to '*meet long term development needs stretching well beyond the plan period*'. 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.

In addition, 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.

Our client's site is roughly triangular in shape and has strong landscape boundaries to all sides. There is also a large block of woodland on the eastern site boundary which conceals the site. The strong landscape framework provides a strong and defensible boundary for the Green Belt. The release of this land would not undermine the purposes of the Green Belt.

Land at Station Road, Tring represents an important opportunity to accommodate some of the Town's immediate development needs, as well as longer term growth aspirations. Development can be sensitively integrated with existing communities and the wider landscape setting. It would be compact, with a high quality public realm (see our response to issue 12).

2.6 How and when will settlement boundaries be reviewed?

In line with our responses to questions 2.4 and 2.5, the Core Strategy should be found unsound without a full Green Belt Review.

Summary to Issue 2

What part of the Core Strategy is unsound?

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?

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

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

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

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