

LOCAL PLAN PRACTISING INSPECTOR'S ADVICE MARTIN PIKE, MAY 2016

Introduction

The Council received Local Plan advice from a practising Planning Inspector in mid May 2016. This was used by officers to inform the site selection evidence that was presented to CHPP on 13 June and the Proposed Submission Local Plan that was presented to CHPP 20 July and Cabinet on 2 August 2016.

Explanation

The Executive Member for Planning and senior planning officers met with a practising Planning Inspector (Martin Pike) in mid May 2016 to discuss the soundness of the Local Plan. Prior to the meeting the Inspector had reviewed our evidence and the content of the draft plan, and was therefore able to make a number of informed observations and recommendations.

He advised that inspectors aim to find local plans sound wherever possible, and that the preference is for adjournment of the public examination rather than dismissal of a local plan where elements of it need further attention. He advised that plans should seek to comply with government policy and that any local variations should be clearly justified.

Some pertinent points around the likelihood of the plan being found sound were discussed. The most significant issue for the soundness of the plan relates to the whether the housing target will meet the objective assessment of need (OAN).

The OAN is set out in the Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) and is derived from looking at population and economic forecasts as well as taking into account the state of the local housing market and affordability issues. It takes as a starting point the population projections published by the Office for National Statistics and then considers a number of different scenarios. The SHMA identifies an OAN which ranges from 12,616 dwellings to 13,433 dwellings.

He considered that the SHMA is a robust piece of evidence but that there is an argument which could be made for selecting a target that meets the lower end of the OAN (12,616 homes). This relates to the variability of economic forecasts over time and the recent more pessimistic national forecasts for economic growth. In addition, he questioned whether it was necessary to make an allowance for the London effect given it should appear in the population projections for other authorities.

He suggested that the housing target could be 'staged' or 'stepped' to have a lower target in the early years of the plan and a higher target in the mid and later years of the plan as green belt sites start coming forward, in order to demonstrate a rolling five year supply of housing land. This has been accepted in other local plans. He cautioned against a shorter plan period to 2026 however.

He advised that starter homes were not yet enacted in secondary legislation and it was therefore reasonable not to be too specific about them at this stage in the plan-making process.

He advised that it will be easier to justify that the plan is sound if we meet the objective assessment of need for housing (and other development such as employment and retail) plus have a degree of flexibility/headroom. In this case we would only need to

demonstrate that the selected sites are the most sustainable choices. He advised that it will be harder to conclude that the plan is sound if it does not meet need. In this situation we would have to give clear reasons why other sites that have been rejected could not come forward. The consequence of not being able to provide reasons could be that the Inspector requires the inclusion of a number of green belt sites and a higher housing target.

He advised that the local green belt test devised by the Council to reduce the risk of coalescence between towns-and-villages and villages-and-villages would be given less weight than the national purposes. The merging of settlements may be considered by an Inspector as a more sustainable option than other site options.

He emphasised that if we do not select a target that meets our need, we will be required to have a clear justification for the sites we have selected and the sites we have rejected.

He advised that we would be asked about housing provision beyond the plan period and that it might be necessary to identify Areas of Special Restraint (safeguarded land) that should be released from the green belt but only brought forward in the long-term by preparing a new plan.

He considered that an approach of using the strategic sites to meet the need for gypsy/traveller pitches is likely to be found sound as long as we select sites based on planning grounds rather than an even/fair distribution.

He was comfortable with our policy intent to protect existing employment areas and identify new employment land at Marshmoor. He was also comfortable that the plan need only make provision for new retail floorspace up to 2026 given the long-term uncertainty about shopping patterns and the future of town centres.

He was comfortable with a criteria-based policy for the possible provision of a third secondary school in the borough.

He was comfortable with the site parameters included in the draft plan in anticipation of the concept of permission-in-principle being enacted through secondary legislation.

He was comfortable with a joint strategic diagram for Birchall Garden Suburb, covering both Welwyn Hatfield and East Herts administrative areas. He recommended that a Memorandum of Understanding be prepared to achieve a common policy approach.

He did not feel there were any notable omissions in our evidence base. He considered that the plan as drafted has a logical structure and has policies on all obvious topics: housing, employment, retail, transport, community facilities, green space, infrastructure, etc.