

Stevenage Borough Council

Stevenage Borough Local Plan 2011-2031

Inspectors Initial Questions

Introduction

1. This note flags up some initial questions I have that would benefit from early clarification. Dealing with these matters now should save time later. In answering these questions can the Council consider whether it might be necessary to advance any potential main modifications to the Local Plan.

Legal Compliance

2. Has the Plan been prepared in accordance with the Local Development Scheme?
3. Has the Plan been prepared in general accordance with the Statement of Community Involvement and public consultation requirements?
4. Have any significant concerns been expressed by interested parties about the Sustainability Appraisal?
5. Have any significant concerns been expressed by interested parties about the Habitat Regulations Assessment?

Housing

6. There would appear to be a discrepancy with the housing numbers in the Plan. Specifically, para 4.5 says that 'our strategy sets out how 8,155 homes will be built in and around Stevenage', whereas Policy SP7 commits to providing at least 7,600 homes and this seems to be the number used elsewhere in the Plan. Can you please provide an explanation for this difference.
7. Policies SP7 and HO7 seek affordable housing as part of all residential development. The Court of Appeal judgement of 11 May 2016 (SS v W Berks DC and Reading BC) concerned national policy on thresholds for planning obligations for affordable housing and tariff style contributions. The effect of the judgement is that the policies in the Written Ministerial Statement of 28 Nov 2014 are once again national policy. The WMS states that affordable housing and tariff style contributions should not be sought for sites of 10 units or less (or 5 in designated rural areas). In this context, is the Council likely to want to amend the Plan?
8. There also appears to be a discrepancy between the affordable housing targets in Policies SP7 and HO7, with SP7 seeking 40%

affordable housing, but policy HO7 applying targets of 25% and 30% (depending on whether the site is previously developed). Can you please explain the rationale for this.

Objectively Assessed Need (OAN)

9. I note that the Council are updating their SHMA and looking at the latest household projections as well as updating the housing technical paper to take into account new completions and data. Consequently I have not looked in detail at the issue of the Council's OAN figure yet. Can you please advise when this further work will be ready. It is likely I will have some questions in relation to the important matter of OAN once I have read all of the documents currently being prepared.

Infrastructure and Highway Safety

10. The Council's Infrastructure Delivery Plan (July 2016) (IDP) appears to contain lots of gaps in funding for some of the large essential infrastructure projects the Plan is predicated on. Of particular concern are those projects that are deemed to be essential, but currently have no committed funding. While I note that the IDP says that these schemes are required to support levels of growth set out in the Plan, but the Plan could proceed without certainty of the funding; I have some concerns about this approach given the number of projects that currently do not have committed funding and the important nature of some of these.
11. It seems that some of these projects are central to the overarching strategy of the Plan and if they were not delivered the delivery of the Plan would be seriously affected. I would be pleased if you could provide some more information about any critical or essential projects that do not currently have committed funding as well as the impact the failure to deliver the particular project would have on the delivery of the Plan and in particular the delivery of houses and jobs in the early years of the Plan.
12. I note that there are some items in the IDP that are dependent on developer contributions from allocated sites in the Plan. Has the cost of these contributions been considered when undertaking viability assessments? If it is shown when the planning applications are submitted that the development could not afford to pay for the works does the Council have a back up Plan or would it mean the infrastructure and potentially the development could not proceed?
13. Also, any updates that the Council can provide in relation to funding would be extremely helpful as I realise that this is something that is evolving.
14. Highways England have expressed concern about the lack of transport modelling to assess the impact of certain sites allocated in the Plan on the A1(M) and the strategic road network. I note that this being carried out and will be available at the end of August. I

look forward to receiving this along with any revised comments from Highways England.

Sustainability Appraisal (SA)

15. What are the key differences between CD LP2 and LP3?

Best and Most Versatile Land (BMV)

16. Paragraph 112 of the National Planning Policy Framework advises that local planning authorities should take into account the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land and that where significant development of agricultural land is demonstrated to be necessary, local planning authorities should seek to use areas of poorer quality land in preference to that of a higher quality. Can the Council please direct me to where they have carried out such an assessment.

Gypsy and traveller site provision

17. Policy HO12 allocates a site for between 11 and 16 pitches. Is this figure derived from the data in para 5.7 of the DCA Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment (2013)? If so, can you please show the calculation that was carried out to arrive at the figure in the policy.
18. Planning Policy for Traveller Sites says at paragraph 24 that 'local planning authorities should consider the following issues amongst other relevant matters when considering planning applications for traveller sites... that they should determine applications for sites from any travellers and not just those with local connections'.
19. However criterion 'a' of Policy HO13 requires applicants seeking gypsy and traveller accommodation on unallocated sites in the borough to demonstrate a local need for accommodation. As such the policy does not accord with National Planning Policy. In this context, is the Council likely to want to amend the Plan?
20. It would appear that the allocated site suffers from surface water flooding issues. Has this constraint been fully considered and if so where?

Conclusion

21. An early response to the above queries would be appreciated. I am keen that the above matters are resolved, in so far as they can be, promptly in order to ensure that the examination is not unduly delayed. Specifically, I will have to reach a view as to whether an exploratory or pre-hearing meeting is required. I therefore request a response by close of play on 22 August 2016.

22. If you have any queries regarding the above then I can be contacted via the Programme Office. A copy of this note and the Council's response should be placed on the examination website.

Louise Crosby
Planning Inspector
12 August 2016