

Stevenage Local Plan Examination: Stage 2

Statement from CPRE Hertfordshire

Matter 5 – Green Belt

Statement by Stephen Baker, DMS, BSc, DipTP, MRTPI, representing CPRE Hertfordshire

This statement complements our original representations on the Local Plan, which are still relevant except where updated by this statement.

Question 1: Do the exceptional circumstances, as required by paragraph 83 of the Framework, exist to justify the plan's proposed revision of the boundaries of the Green Belt.

1. Please also refer to CPRE Hertfordshire's related Statement and representations on Policies SP7 and SP10, addressed under Matter 4.
2. No demonstration that exceptional circumstances exist has been set out in Chapter 5 of Plan, or in Chapter 9, for the removal of sites HO3 and HO4 from the Green Belt. Our objections to proposed Housing Allocations HO3 and HO4 will be addressed at Stage 3 of the Examination under Matter 16.
3. The NPPF points out that exceptional circumstances must be demonstrated in order to allow land to be taken out of the Green Belt through a Local Plan, and this has not been done in respect of the five 'parcels' of Green Belt land listed in Paragraph 5.129.
4. Paragraph 5.126 simply states that Council's approach is set out in a Technical Paper, since amended, and a statement that the Council considers that future development and regeneration needs 'do provide the exceptional circumstances' required to alter Green Belt boundaries.
5. The Council's latest Green Belt Technical Paper (TP3) is stated by the Council to set out the exceptional circumstances for 'rolling back' the Green Belt, referring to the key 'Calverton' court case.
6. Two flawed assumptions appear to underpin the Council's consideration of this fundamental issue.

7. Firstly at paragraph 1.21 of the Technical Paper the Council dismisses objections that refer to national guidance on this issue on the basis that the guidance relates only to planning applications and not local plans. This is an entirely irrelevant comment, because the Government through successive Planning Ministers, for example Brandon Lewis's letter to local planning authorities on 7 June 2016, has repeatedly made policy statements that housing need alone does not amount to exceptional circumstances that would justify changing Green Belt boundaries through a local plan.
8. Secondly, in referring to the Calverton case, the court's confirmation of the above national Planning policy position, at paragraph 50, is completely ignored, and the court's analysis of what is necessary to demonstrate exceptional circumstances is misapplied, as shown in section 2 of the Technical Paper.
9. For example, in paragraph 2.1 the Council argues that any development needs become more acute because of the limited land available. This cannot be correct. The nature of the individual elements that make up the calculation of need must each have its own degree of acuteness.
10. The fact that the Council has included a significant 'uplift' to its cumulative calculation of elements of assessed housing need, which already include 'footloose' migrants from London and elsewhere, reveals that there are elements of 'need' that are clearly not 'acute' as meant by the Calverton judges. A simple desire or aspiration to live in Stevenage, and a supplementary 'buffer' of additional houses on top of this cannot be considered to be of equal importance to meeting the need of local concealed and homeless households. The former should certainly not be considered to be sufficient to outweigh national Green Belt policy, given that removal of any land from the Green Belt has an adverse impact on at least one nationally defined Green Belt purpose.
11. CPRE Hertfordshire strongly disputes the statement at paragraph 5.124 of the Plan, that the land the Council proposes to take out of the Green Belt can be released for development '*without damage to the overall purpose of the Green Belt in this location.*'
12. This mistaken conclusion is compounded by paragraph 5.127 claiming that the Council's evidence demonstrates that the release of sites from the Green Belt '*will not harm the overall purposes of the Green Belt in this area.*' This is a flaw in the reasoning set out in the Plan, apparently based on advice which fails to fully reflect all five defined purposes of the Green Belt, perhaps because of the way the advice has been applied.

13. CPRE considers that the failure to provide an analysis of the various elements of housing and other development needs in terms of how much weight should be given to them in comparison with the weight to be given to Green Belt policy and purposes is a major flaw in the Plan that renders it unsound in terms of proposed Green Belt boundary changes.
14. The above comments on this matter are complemented by our statement on the lack of conformity of several of the Plan's policies with the NPPF, and in particular Policies SP7 and SP10, under Matter 4, 'General'.
15. CPRE Hertfordshire (CPRE) objections to Policy GB2 are addressed in our Statement on Stage 2, Matter 4, 'General', in respect of the wording of proposed Green Belt policy for the area at Todd's Green.

CPRE Hertfordshire, January 2017