



STEVENAGE LOCAL PLAN EXAMINATION

STATEMENT BY HISTORIC ENGLAND

Matter 16: Housing Site Allocations

Hearing Session on Thursday 23 March 2017

References:

Publication draft – January 2016, policy HO3: North of Stevenage (document LP1)

Collected representations made under Regulation 20 (document LP8)

Revised Housing Targets Consultation – statement of consultation (document LPD3)

Stevenage Local Plan First Consultation – statement of consultation (document LPD5)

Heritage Impact Assessment 2015 (document CH2)

St. Nicholas / Rectory Lane Conservation Area Management Plan Supplementary Planning Document 2012 (document CH9)

St. Nicholas / Rectory Lane Conservation Area Appraisal 2009

Stevenage Borough Council Executive Committee Paper of December 2007

A Review of Stevenage Conservation Areas 2005

Historic England Advice Note 1: Conservation Area Designation, Appraisal and Management

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Introduction

1. In carrying out its role in protecting and managing the historic environment Historic England gives advice to local planning authorities on certain categories of applications affecting the historic environment. Historic England is the principal Government adviser on the historic environment, advising it on planning and listed building consent applications, appeals and other matters generally affecting the historic environment.
2. Historic England is consulted on Local Development Plans under the provisions of the duty to co-operate and provides advice to ensure that legislation and national policy in the National Planning Policy Framework are thereby reflected in local planning policy and practice.
3. The tests of soundness require that Local Development Plans should be positively prepared, justified, effective and consistent with national policy. Historic England's representations in relation to the Publication Draft Local Plan are made in the context of the requirements of the National Planning Policy Framework ("the Framework") in relation to the historic environment as a component of sustainable development.
4. This statement addresses the Inspector's questions with regards to Matter 16 and site allocation to the North of Stevenage. In line with the requirements of the Framework, we challenge the soundness of policy HO3.
5. This hearing statement should be read alongside Historic England's comments submitted online at previous consultation stages in 2013 (document LPD5), 2015 (document LPD3) and 2016 (document LP8) and our Hearing Statements for Matter 4 and Matter 12.

Inspector's Questions

6. We set out below our responses to the Inspector's questions in light of our historic environment role.

Questions

Inspector's Question 1. Are the proposed housing site allocations appropriate and justified in the light of potential constraints, infrastructure requirements and adverse impacts?

6.1 Whilst Stevenage Borough has limited options within its boundary to bring forward development, this is not a justification for development that does not have regard to the statutory tests set out in s66(a) and s72(1) of the Planning (Listed Building and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 and Chapter 12 of the National Planning Policy Framework, given the duty to co-operate with surrounding authorities. As such, we question the appropriateness of allocation HO3.

Inspector's Question 2. Are the assumptions regarding the capacity of the sites justified, what is this based on?

6.2 Historic England is not in a position to reach a conclusion on the dwelling capacity at this stage. We consider that the precise dwelling capacity of the site allocation HO3 North of Stevenage will be dependent upon a design led approach to ensure the delivery of a sustainable allocation that provides appropriate protection to the historic environment.

6.3 However, we are in a position to recommend the most appropriate geographical extent of development. In summary, we propose that the allocation should not extend into the St Nicholas and Rectory Lane Conservation Area for the reasons set out in our previous submissions and Matter 12 Hearing Statement, particularly in paragraphs 6.1 to 6.5.

Inspector's Question 4. Are the detailed requirements for each of the allocations clear and justified? Have site constraints, development mix and viability considerations been adequately addressed? Are the boundaries and extent of the sites correctly defined?

6.4 The boundary and extent of site allocation HO3 has not been correctly defined as it does not adequately address the harm to designated heritage assets and their setting. The site allocation should not include the conservation area for the reasoning set out in paragraphs 6.1 to 6.6 in our Matter 12 Hearing Statement owing to the considerable level of harm that would be caused to designated heritage assets and their setting.

6.5 Historic England's advice is that there should be no development within the conservation area.

6.6 Whilst conservation area designation is not generally an appropriate means of protecting the wider landscape, it can be used where the landscape is part of the

significance of the conservation area, for example, where green spaces are an essential component of a wider historic area or where open areas relate to the character and appearance of the historic fabric (see *Historic England Advice Note 1: Conservation Area Designation, Appraisal and Management*, paragraphs 11 and 12).

- 6.7 The St Nicholas and Rectory Lane Conservation Area was extended in 2007 to cover the landscape. The recommendation to extend was based on a review of all Stevenage conservation areas by BEAMS in 2005. At paragraph 4.6 when discussing setting and focal points it states, *“To the west, the setting is formed by open farmland over which there are extensive views from the conservation area. This land frames long distance views towards key buildings or building groups such as the church and The Old Bury and Rooks Nest Farm. These views are important from both inside and outside of the conservation area.”* It goes on to say when considering important spaces at paragraph 4.12, *“These are all historically well established spaces: the churchyard with its boundary wall, the meadow west of The Old Bury, the long field leading to the meadow that is cut by the main road, and the water meadow to the south with a stream flowing through.”*
- 6.8 The report identifies the suggested boundary changes at paragraph 4.31 and 4.32, *“The open fields to the north west are an integral part of the landscape in which buildings in the conservation area sit...They are just as important components of the settlement as the meadows either side of Rectory Lane. The rights of way across the fields are as significant a feature as the footpath through the street. The settlement should be seen “in the round”. It is recommended that the conservation area boundary should therefore take in the fields towards the lines of pylons using a long established hedge line / woodland edge as the boundary. The boundary shown on the accompanying plan is based on the vistas from within the conservation area from Weston Road and Rectory Lane. Also, seen from the rights of way looking back into the conservation area...”*
- 6.9 The 2007 Executive Committee Paper proposing the extension of the conservation area was categorical, *“The BEAMS report for the Borough Council states that...the open fields to the north-west are a fundamental part of the landscape....”* Faced with an imminent planning application for the site, the paper goes on to state, *“The proposed boundary will provide immediate additional control measures for the protection of the historical landscape area, known as Forster Country...”* As the 2009 Conservation Area Appraisal states in the assessment of the special interest of the landscape setting, which the conservation area was extended to include in 2007, at paragraph 4.6, *“Despite being located at the northern edge of the vast ‘New Town’ of Stevenage, the St Nicholas / Rectory Lane area has managed to retain a sense of its earlier historic rural identity, views of the open fields to the north from vantage points such as St Nicholas Church help reinforce this.”*
- 6.10 Historic England would note that the significance of this landscape has not changed since its inclusion within the conservation area.

Development adjacent to the conservation area

- 6.11 In paragraph 6.7 of our Matter 12 Hearing Statement we reiterate our conclusion that there will be harm to the significance of the setting of both the conservation area and the listed buildings if development is permitted outside the conservation area in the area identified as 'A' in the *Heritage Impact Assessment* (CH2). If, after this harm is weighed against the public benefits, area 'A' outside the conservation area is allocated further assessment of the potential impacts is necessary. This is to ensure that a design led approach brings an appropriate capacity for the site, as the *Heritage Impact Assessment* is not comprehensive.
- 6.12 We believe that the heritage assessment significantly underestimates the harm to the significance of the conservation area and is deficient in not considering the harm to the significance of the setting of the only two grade I buildings in Stevenage – St Nicholas' Church and Rooks Nest House and to the conservation area itself. Historic England disagrees with the assessment's conclusion that whilst the inclusion of a parcel of land within the conservation area would affect the character and appearance of that part of the conservation area, it was not fundamental to the significance of the conservation area (please also see paragraphs 6.10 to 6.12 in our Matter 12 Hearing Statement and our consultation response dated 17 February 2016).
- 6.13 If area 'A' site outside of the conservation area is taken forward for allocation, appropriate mitigation measures will need to be put in place through policy HO3. In particular we would identify HO3 m ii, iii, iv, v, vi, and that as part of any development proposal the open space within the conservation area is retained as such and preserved and, where opportunities arise, enhanced.

Urban Extensions

Policy HO3 – North of Stevenage

Inspector's Question 2. Has the impact of the proposal on the character and appearance of the surrounding area been formally considered?

- 6.14 No, the impact on the character and appearance of the surrounding areas has not been fully considered.
- 6.15 This part of the St Nicholas and Rectory Lane Conservation Area is a complex layer of multiple designations, settings and vistas which have to be considered in a holistic way. For the reasons set out in paragraphs 6.10 to 6.12 in our Matter 12 Hearing Statement and our consultation response dated 17 February 2016 we do not believe that this has been fully and formally considered through the *Heritage Impact Assessment* (CH2).

- 6.16 Some of the significant views and vistas are identified in figure 31 of the *Conservation Area Appraisal* (page 32), but do not include the nearly 180° view from the corner of St Nicholas' churchyard from northwest to southeast, the views west and south west from Rooks Nest House, and the views back from the length of boundary of the conservation area back towards both of Stevenage's only grade I listed buildings - St Nicholas' Church and Rooks Nest House (and other designated heritage assets such as the grade II* Bury).
- 6.17 We would specifically note that these views and vistas are from the boundary of the conservation area, not the current site allocation boundary within the conservation area which significantly foreshortens these views and vistas.
- 6.18 Whilst the Policy limits development to two storeys, the topography of the area and the seasonality of the existing landscaping is such that development inside or outside of the conservation area will harm the significance of designated heritage assets and their setting, the complexities of which have not been formally considered through the Heritage Impact Assessment.

Inspector's Question 3. Would the proposal result in harm to heritage assets?

- 6.19 Yes. The site allocation includes multiple layers of significance to individual designated heritage assets. As we have noted in our previous correspondence, by their nature it is difficult to assess the level of harm potentially caused by site allocations which, once adopted, can be interpreted and developed in a number of different ways.
- 6.20 However, the complexity of the multiple designations, settings, views and vistas, and layers of significance make it clear that the level of harm that the whole allocation poses would be considerable.
- 6.21 Paragraph 132 of the *National Planning Policy Framework* states that when considering the impact of a proposed development on the significance of a designated heritage asset, great weight should be given to the asset's conservation. The more important the asset, the greater the weight should be. Significance can be harmed or lost through development within an asset's setting. Paragraph 138 sets out that where there is loss of an element making a positive contribution to a conservation area it should be treated either as substantial harm under paragraph 133 or less than substantial harm under paragraph 134 as appropriate, taking into account the relative significance of the element affected and its contribution to the significance of the conservation area.

Conservation Area

- 6.22 Development within the conservation area would cause considerable harm to the significance of the conservation area and there would be severe harm to one of the key elements of the conservation area – its landscape, which the conservation area

was specifically extended in order to include and protect (see the 2007 *Stevenage Borough Council Executive Committee Paper* of December, the 2009 *Conservation Area Appraisal*, and document CH9).

6.23 If the bar is high for substantial harm, it therefore follows that several degrees of harm are classified as ‘less than substantial’ and all degrees of harm matter, given the statutory tests in the Planning (Listed Building and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 and the requirements of paragraph 132. We have identified a very high level of harm to the conservation area, although less than substantial in terms of the *Framework*.

Setting of the Conservation Area

6.24 Development outside of the conservation area would be harmful to the setting of the conservation area. This would cause less than substantial harm to the significance of the conservation area in terms of the *Framework*.

Setting of the Listed Buildings

6.25 The setting of a number of listed buildings are affected by the proposal including both of Stevenage’s grade I listed buildings (St Nicholas’ Church and Rooks Nest House), the grade II* Bury and the grade II buildings at Rooks Nest Farm. We have identified harm to the setting of all of these buildings but will confine our comments here to the two most highly graded.

6.26 The harm to the setting of Rooks Nest House is severe, owing to its special interest and consequent grade I status being significantly related to its connection with the author E. M. Forster and the novel *Howards End*. The harm to the setting of St Nicholas’ Church is considerable. Collectively, the harm to all the settings of the listed buildings by the site allocation is a very high level of harm and there, therefore, would be harm to the significance of the designated heritage assets although less than substantial in terms of the *Framework*.

Conclusion

6.27 Stevenage Borough Council in their Matter 12 Hearing Statement state at paragraph 2.5 that, “(n)o substantial harm will occur to any heritage asset as a result of the SBLP. Any loss or harm likely to occur to a heritage asset as a result of these site allocations has been comprehensively assessed and appropriately weighed against the public benefits of the proposal.” As the *Planning Practice Guidance* notes, substantial harm is a high test and there may be situations where a proposal makes a considerable impact that does not meet this threshold, in which case the harm will be less than substantial in terms of the *Framework*. Though less than substantial harm in itself can be severe (Paragraph: 017 Reference ID: 18a-017-20140306 Revision date: 06 03 2014). Though there may be public benefits accruing from the proposed development, they would have to exceed a high threshold to outweigh the less than substantial harm we have set out in our submissions.

6.28 Historic England does not believe that this threshold has been met and there should be no development within the conservation area.

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