

Stevenage Borough Local Plan examination

February 2017

Stevenage Borough Council response to publication of '*Fixing our broken housing market*', the Housing White Paper, 7 February 2017

In response to an invitation from the Inspector conducting the examination into the submission version of the Stevenage Borough Local Plan to review the DCLG White Paper '*Fixing our broken housing market*' ("HWP") and to identify anything contained within the Local Plan which might be considered to be inconsistent with the contents of the White Paper, the Borough Council would respond as follows.

None of the principal proposals within the HWP are yet active. Whilst some of the proposals indicate a likely timescale, none of the key proposals relevant to plan-making appear likely to be included within published policy or guidance until 2018 at the earliest. This is unsurprising, given that many of the proposals are subject to further, detailed work and/or to consultation in one form or another.

Given that the White Paper is, in essence, a statement of intent by the government [to act at some point in the future], it would not be appropriate for the SBLP to be assessed against its proposals as part of the consideration of its soundness. Nonetheless, it is encouraging to see that both the HWP and the SBLP share the same direction of travel. The approach of the Borough Council is, in large measure, '*ahead of the game*' and, where relevant, the approach taken in the preparation of the Plan is consistent with the HWP.

The starting point of the White Paper in respect of plan-making matters is the assessment of housing need. A new and consistent nationwide methodology has been promised by April 2018, but only following consultation. There is no detail as yet. The methodology will have to feed into a revised NPPG. The SHMA that the Borough Council has undertaken in respect of the submitted SBLP is current-NPPG compliant and is an "honest" assessment of need as encouraged by the HWP. The absence of any significant objection to the SHMA's methodology reflects this.

The HWP places a renewed emphasis on bringing brownfield land back into use and upon building more homes on public sector land. The SBLP already adopts this approach and is, therefore, consistent with the direction of travel of the White Paper.

The White Paper also stresses the importance of local plans providing a range of small and medium-sized housing allocation sites. New Towns face particular issues in identifying small brownfield sites for redevelopment that, in traditional towns, would be commonplace: small builder's yards, Victorian workshops, allotments, urban 'wildernesses'; as these are simply not available. Within those constraints, the SBLP allocates a range of size and types of sites for housing development.

The Housing White Paper also encourages the sub-division of allocated sites to enable smaller builders to become involved. The SBLP's four strategic sites [town centre, Stevenage West, Stevenage North and Stevenage South-East] have been *de-facto* sub-divided by the promoters, either by dint of land-ownership/options or to assist in delivery.

In terms of the revision to existing Green Belt boundaries, the HWP proposes providing some assistance in the definition of the term “exceptional circumstances”. In essence, the proposal is that, before Green Belt is released to provide for development, it must be demonstrated that there are no reasonable alternatives. That is the approach to the exceptional circumstance test which the Council has consistently taken in the preparation of the Plan and therefore it indicates no relevant change in direction.

The HWP also suggests that consideration should be given to off-setting the effect of revisions to remove land from the Green Belt by requiring that new land parcels be added to it. This is rarely feasible in small, intensely urban LPAs, such as Stevenage Borough, where only the inner Green Belt boundary lies within the administrative area. Where the outer Green Belt boundary lies outwith the administrative area of the LPA, those opportunities for creating new areas of Green Belt will be for the authorities in those areas to consider whether such a step should be taken, having regard to the overall objectives of the general extent of the Green Belt.

The Council is satisfied that exceptional circumstances exist for each of its proposed Green Belt releases, notwithstanding the absence of any compensating additions elsewhere.

The HWP encourages high density residential development in suitable well-accessed locations, such as town centres and adjacent to urban railway stations. The SBLP has adopted this approach, promoting significant high density, new residential development close to the train station, in and around the town centre, as set out in the Town Centre chapter of the SBLP and our matters’ statements.

The White Paper also sets out a proposed revised definition of affordable housing. However, this is subject to consultation and there will be a transition period to allow for the new definition, scheduled to come into force from April 2018. This is also to be consulted upon. Consequently, it is not pertinent to the current assessment of the SBLP.

With the exception of the SBLP’s proposed policy on sites of 1 - 9 units making a contribution to affordable housing (already dealt with in the Borough Council’s pertinent matters’ statement), the Local Plan is not at odds with any of the proposals in the Housing White Paper of 7 February 2017.

It is, therefore, the considered view of the Stevenage Borough Council, that the publication of the proposals contained within the HWP has no material implications for the soundness of the Stevenage Borough Local Plan.