

**North Hertfordshire Local Plan
Further Examination Hearings**

Matter 23

Wednesday 18th March 2020

Statement by Jed Griffiths MA DipTP FRTPI

**On Behalf of Knebworth, Codicote, and
Wymondley Parish Councils**

February 2020

Introduction

1. This statement has been prepared by Jed Griffiths MA DipTP FRTPI on behalf of the Parish Councils of Knebworth, Codicote, and Wymondley. The views set out in the document are also supported by Woolmer Green Parish Council. It has been compiled in response to the invitation by the Examination Inspector to submit material on the matters to be considered at further hearing sessions to be held in March 2020. The statement addresses the issues and questions under Matter 23 – the Green Belt Review work and the site selection process.
2. Earlier representations have been made by Knebworth and the other Parish Councils about the Green Belt policy and site allocations as set out in the submitted Local Plan. Where appropriate, references will be made to previous documents and to representations made at earlier hearing sessions, particularly on Matter 7. The main purpose of this statement, however, is to focus on the issues and questions raised by the Inspector in the schedule published in January 2020.

The Green Belt Review and Site Selection

3. In his introduction to Matter 23, the Inspector refers to Paper B of the Council's response to the Inspector's letter of 9th July 2019 (document ED172). The Parish Councils have studied this document in some depth – the responses to the Inspector's questions are set out below.

Q23.1 (a) Have I understood the approach taken correctly?

4. The Council's approach is summarised at the end of document ED172, in the attachment titled Matter 9 Appendix A: Site Assessment Flow Chart. The Parish Councils acknowledge that there are essentially two stages, but they disagree fundamentally with the conclusions reached by the Council in the site selection process.

Q23.1 (b) Is the approach taken reasonable, adequately robust and consistent with national policy?

5. The Parish Councils' view is that the Council's approach is inconsistent with national policy in that it fails to give adequate weight to the protection of the Green Belt. As set out in previous representations, exceptional circumstances have not been demonstrated for the scale of the release of Green Belt land for housing, particularly in the light of the latest, significantly lower, household projections for North Hertfordshire.

Q23.1 (c) The Sustainability Appraisal is not influenced by the degree to which land does or does not contribute to the purposes of including land in the Green Belt. Should it be?

6. In the letter of 9th July 2019, the Inspector queries the approach to the Green Belt which is taken in the Sustainability Appraisal. The Council, in its response (ED172, paragraph 40), firmly states that Green Belt is a policy designation, not an environmental designation. From that statement, it appears that the Council is seeking to downplay the role of the Sustainability Appraisal (SA). Although the Sustainability Appraisal is not a policy designation, it does exert a very powerful influence on policy choices and site selection.

7. The SA is an iterative process, which is undertaken, and re-visited, at various stages of plan preparation. Prior to submission, it is a key element in determining whether or not the Local Plan is sound. As the Council have pointed out (paragraphs 41 and 42 of ED172), the SA incorporates the requirement for the local planning authority to produce a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) of its Local Plan. The problem is that environmental aspects of the SA/SEA may be overshadowed by social and economic elements. Thus, one of the key purposes of Green Belt policy – to prevent encroachment on the countryside – may be given insufficient weight in the determination of policy. The Parish Councils support the view that the Council and their consultants have allowed social and economic factors to override environmental sustainability in reaching conclusions about the release of Green Belt and the major housing allocations, especially those to the east of Luton.

8. How can Green Belt policy be independent of sustainability when one of its key purposes is to protect the countryside? The loss of Green Belt and countryside would have serious implications for our ability to tackle the effects of a growing climate emergency. Both North Hertfordshire District and Stevenage Borough Councils have recently declared climate emergencies. Destruction of the Green Belt, leading to increased potential for flooding, and air quality, would have a significant detrimental effect on the environment and the health and well-being of residents. These points were highlighted in the recent report of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for London's Green Belt. The report, entitled "A Positive Vision for London's Green Belt", was published in the autumn of 2019, jointly by CPRE and the London Green Belt Council.

The Site Assessment

Q23.2 (a) Should the change in the assessment of those parcels of land (including the safeguarded land to the west of Stevenage) lead to their allocation for development/identification as safeguarded land in the Local plan being rejected?

Q23.2 (b) If so, and bearing in mind the methodology used, why does the change in the assessment render the Local Plan unsound in this respect?

9. In the second issue listed under Matter 23, the Inspector is concerned about the changes in the assessment of sites resulting from the Green Belt Review Update (GBRU). The Parish Councils note the list of eleven sites in the GBRU which are now considered to make a significant contribution to the purposes (ED161A).
10. The finer-grained approach to the Green Belt Review, with the division of areas into sub-parcels, is to be welcomed. Clearly, this results in a more critical analysis, which identifies more precisely those areas which make a significant contribution to Green Belt purposes. There is a particular focus on those sub-parcels which prevent encroachment on the open countryside (Described in Figure 4.3 and Table 2 of ED161A). Significantly, these include sub-parcels adjacent to the village of Knebworth.
11. It is the firm view of Knebworth Parish Council that the changes in the assessment of the eleven parcels of land should lead to the rejection of their allocation for development. This would include sub-parcels 8a, 8b, and 8c on the edge of Knebworth. On a more general level, however, the Parish Councils strongly believe that the Council have not demonstrated the exceptional circumstances which would justify the release of large areas of Green Belt for development, as required by the NPPF 2012. As pointed out in Planning Practice Guidance, housing need and/or demand are not in themselves exceptional circumstances that would justify Green Belt releases. The sole justification by the Council for Green Belt releases is to meet the level of housing need in North Hertfordshire, but the latest 2016-based household projections show that this level is now much lower. It is clear that the balance required by paragraph 14 of the NPPF 2012 (and its footnote highlighting Green Belt policy) should be applied.

12. The conclusion to the GBRU (ED161A), set out in Chapter 6, is astonishing, given the results of the assessment. In its Paper B (ED172, paragraph 28), the Council accepts that all the strategic sites would have a significant impact on the openness of the Green Belt, mainly because of the introduction of large volumes of development into areas of countryside. All sub-parcels except one are assessed in the GBRU as having at least a moderate impact on the Green Belt purposes. There are many instances where both the overall contribution to the Green Belt purposes was assessed as significant in both the original Green Belt Review 2016 and in the GBRU 2018. Despite this conclusion, all of these sites remain as allocations in the Local Plan.
13. Recent decisions on Local Plans suggest that, even if a site allocation would have a major impact on **one** of the Green Belt purposes, it should be given considerable weight. This would be in accordance with paragraph 14 of the NPPF 2012, which states that Local Plans should meet development needs unless specific policies indicate development should be restricted. The results of the GBRU are clear – to allocate most of the Green Belt sites for development would render the Local Plan unsound.
14. In accordance with the Inspector’s note under Matter 23.2, the Parish Councils have not gone into the detail of individual sites. These points can be elaborated either in the Matter 23 hearing sessions or under Matters 25 and 26 as appropriate.

Jed Griffiths

Hertford

27th February 2020