

**North Hertfordshire Local Plan
Further Examination Hearings**

MATTER 24

Thursday 19th March 2020

**Statement by Jed Griffiths MA DipTP FRTPI
On Behalf of CPRE Hertfordshire**

February 2020

Introduction

1. This statement has been prepared by Jed Griffiths MA DipTP FRTPI on behalf of the Campaign to Protect Rural England, Hertfordshire (CPREH). It has been compiled in response to an invitation by the Examination Inspector to submit material on the matters to be considered at further hearing sessions to be held in March 2020. This statement addresses the issues and questions under Matter 24 – the proposed “East of Luton” sites.
2. Earlier representations have been made by CPREH in respect of this issue, particularly on Matter 10 of the examination hearings. Where appropriate cross-references will be made to the Matter 10 material and to other documentation. 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.
3. The Local Plan is clear that three sites are proposed to the east of Luton (Sites EL1 – EL3). These would deliver a total of 2,100 dwellings, 1,950 of which were to assist in providing for the unmet housing needs of the Borough of Luton (Policy SP19).. Consideration of these sites, and other options around Luton, were set out in the Luton HMA Growth Options Study 2016 (document HOU7). Given the changing circumstances and the passage of time, CPREH agrees with the Inspector that it is now relevant to re-consider options for the housing needs of Luton outside of the North Hertfordshire administrative area.

Q24.1 (a) Does the Growth Options Study provide a comparative assessment of the options for addressing the unmet housing needs of Luton Borough.

4. The Growth Options Study (HOU7) was published in 2016, not only as part of the evidence base for the Luton Local Plan, but also to support the North Hertfordshire and Central Bedfordshire Local Plans. A key assumption behind the study was the extent to which the Borough Council could not meet its unmet housing needs, a total of 9,300 dwellings in the period 2011 – 2031.
5. With the publication of the ONS 2016-based household projections, it is highly likely that this figure is too high. As CPREH has pointed out in its statement on Matter 10 (paragraph 5), the Inspector examining the Luton Local Plan accepted that at least 1,800 more dwellings would be provided within the urban fabric of Luton than had been originally estimated.

6. As CPREH has stated in its representations on Matter 21, there has been a change in the context for the calculation of the objectively-assessed housing need (OAN). Taken together with the factors outlined above, a new option study would need to be conducted from a different base-line, using the latest available projections and other data, including that generated by the national census 2021.

Q24.1 (b) From the Council’s analysis in Paper C (see paragraph 39) of its response to my letter dated 9th July 2019, the Growth Options Study does not identify sufficient alternative growth locations with strong links to Luton – either through physical proximity or high-quality public transport proximity – that would allow Luton’s unmet housing needs to be met on land that is preferable in Green Belt terms to the East of Luton sites. Is the Council’s analysis correct, and if not, how is it incorrect?

Q24.1 (c) From the Council’s analysis in Paper C (see paragraphs 40 and 41) of its response to my letter dated 9th July 2019, the Growth Options Study identifies a total capacity of approximately 12,800 homes in locations that (partly at least) make a lesser contribution to the purposes of including land within the Green Belt. Is the Council’s analysis correct, and if not how is it incorrect?

Q24.1 (d) Without the “East of Luton” sites, are there any alternative options (with a reasonable likelihood of being delivered) for meeting Luton Borough’s unmet housing need, bearing in mind the approach being taken in the Central Bedfordshire Local Plan and the current position in relation to the examination of that plan?

7. The responses to these three questions are inter-linked and are set out below. CPREH has studied the analysis in the Council’s Paper C which is referred to above (document ED173), and other related documents.
8. It is clear from the Green Belt Review Update (ED161A, Figure 4.3 and Table 2) that the sub-parcels on sites EL1 – EL3 make a significant contribution to the purposes of the Green Belt, in particular the prevention of encroachment onto countryside. In ED173, the Council has pointed out that there are other sites in the Luton HMA which seemingly make a lesser contribution to Green Belt purposes. Whether the figure of 12,800 dwellings is, or is not, correct, it is considerably higher than the 1,950 dwellings allocated in the North Hertfordshire Local Plan specifically to meet the needs of Luton. The Council has emphasised again (see ED173, paragraphs 3 and 73) that these sites “are substantively intended to address unmet needs arising from Luton Borough” – i.e. not for meeting the needs of North Hertfordshire District.

9. In paragraph 69 of ED173, the Council quotes from the Inspector examining the Luton Local Plan, which pointed out that “only a small part of Aylesbury Vale and North Hertfordshire falls within the Luton HMA.” This is an important point, and raises the question as to how the allocations to the East of Luton can really be justified.
10. In answer to the Inspector’s questions, it is clear that there may be alternative less harmful locations. In particular, it has been argued that the expansion of Luton to the west should be re-examined. The Council refer to this in paragraph 44 of ED173, quoting paragraph 1.3.5 of the Central Bedfordshire statement on Matter 4 of its Local Plan Examination. The analysis of site L24 in the Growth Options Study (HOU7) shows that this area would have considerable potential for addressing the unmet housing needs of Luton and Central Bedfordshire. CPREH recognises that most of L24 is also in the Green Belt, but it is clear that this is just one of so many key factors which have changed since the completion of the Growth Options Study – including Brexit, updated ONS household projections, and changes to national planning policy.
11. Appended to ED173 are the Inspectors’ letters to Central Bedfordshire Council about the issues which need be addressed in respect of the Local Plan which is still under examination. The first letter, dates 30th September 2019, raises general concerns about the deliverability of housing. The second, dated 28th October 2019, notes that planning permission had been granted for the construction of the M1 – A6 link road. In that letter, the Inspectors have raised the issue as to whether this decision would unlock further capacity for housing development in the area.
12. CPREH acknowledges that the Central Bedfordshire Local Plan is still under examination, and it would clearly be wrong to pre-judge the final content of it at this stage. Nevertheless, the current hiatus around that plan and the above two letters compound the state of uncertainty surrounding planning policy in the Luton HMA and beyond. There is also the issue of the latest 2016-based household projections, which are much lower than those used when preparing both the North Hertfordshire and Luton Local Plans.. CPREH has raised this issue under Matter 21 and elsewhere, but it does pose the question as to whether the East of Luton allocations are genuinely necessary, given their importance in terms of Green Belt purposes, and in the context of the NPPF 2012 (paragraph 14).

13. The Council (at ED173, paragraph 31) makes reference to the Growth Options Study which concluded that the capacity of sites “around” the Luton and Houghton Regis/Dunstable conurbation, without resort to Green Belt, amounted to 200 dwellings. CPREH questions this figure as being too low. We have also referred to the Inspector at the Luton Local Plan Examination, who concluded that capacity within the urban areas had been under-estimated (see paragraph 5 above). The recently-granted planning permission for a new stadium for Luton Town Football Club is indicative of the additional capacity which may exist. As we have stated elsewhere, a more comprehensive study is required of urban capacity and the potential for higher densities and windfall development. This should be part of a review of the Growth Options Study.
14. Any review should also take account of the uncertainty which has been introduced by the publication of proposals for the expansion of Luton Airport to a capacity of 32 million passengers per annum (32ppa). Both CPREH and CPRE Bedfordshire have objected to the proposals, which were set out in FUTURE LUTON: London Luton Airport Expansion Consultation, December 2019. The consultation included details of existing and proposed car parking at the airport, which exposed the considerable areas of surface car parking. If the airport capacity were to be doubled, the car parking would also increase by 7,700 spaces.
15. In terms of sustainability, Luton Airport has the lowest proportion of surface access by public transport in the UK. The large areas deployed for surface car parking are extremely wasteful of space. In the growing climate emergency, it is to be hoped that the expansion plans will be rejected. Nevertheless, it is clear that, with some imagination, better use could be made of land within the airport. CPREH estimates that, if half the existing 14,000 car parking space, and half the proposed 22,000 spaces, were to be released, an area of between 14 – 22 hectares could be available. With reference to the recent BBBBC report Living with Beauty, a “gentle” urban density of 100 dwellings per hectare could produce between 1400 and 2200 dwellings.
16. This is by no means a proposal from CPREH, but it does illustrate the potential for the re-use of brownfield land and increasing housing densities. It calls into question the assumptions about windfall and urban capacity which were made in the Growth Options Study. The NPPF 2019 (paragraph 137) now requires that Councils should fully examine the potential to make as much use as possible of brown field sites.

17. In the current circumstances, CPREH urges the removal of sites EL1 – EL3 from the Local Plan. In addition to the points made above, we would refer to our statement made on Matter 10, which emphasised the permanent (i.e. irreversible) harm which would be caused to the Green Belt and countryside. The whole of the area between Luton and Stevenage is a vitally important tract of rural landscape which merits continued protection. As has been noted previously in these hearings, its significance prompted the application by the Chilterns Conservation Board for it to be considered as an extension to the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

18. In conclusion, it is clear to CPREH that meeting Luton's housing needs should be resolved by a further review of all the relevant Local Plans, not by the imposition of damaging development beyond the boundaries of Luton in valued and sensitive rural landscapes in long-established Green Belt.

Q24.1 (e) The Sustainability Appraisal does not consider land or sites outside of North Hertfordshire. Should it?

19. CPREH agrees with the Council, and the Inspector's point, that it is beyond the jurisdiction of the North Hertfordshire Local Plan Sustainability Appraisal to make judgements about options beyond the Local Plan area.

Jed Griffiths

Hertford

26th February 2020