

East Herts Core Strategy Issues and Options Consultation **Response by CPRE Hertfordshire**

Dear Sir/Madam,

CPRE have chosen not to respond to the Core Strategy Issues and Options Consultation through the on-line questionnaire. This is because we consider the consultation documentation to be flawed and insufficient to allow meaningful responses to be made on many of the questions asked.

As outlined below, some of the narrative in the consultation document we find misleading and containing a high number of caveats, some of the options we consider to be based on dubious or simplistic assumptions and some of the information required to make a measured judgement is missing.

Much of the consultation is built on the requirements of the East of England Plan Review. Recent judgements on the Regional Spatial Strategy notwithstanding, it isn't sufficient to simply say that at some, unspecified, point in the future the Council will review the Issues and Options in the light of the rescinding of the RSS. The Government has made it clear that this is to be rescinded and a consultation based on it, at this stage, will be abortive. In effect the public are being asked to make judgements on something which will shortly have no validity. The Council will inevitably have to make fundamental changes to the Issues and Options and the public will have to be consulted again on those changes. This calls into question the value of the current process.

For example, the cover of the Summary Leaflet asks the question: "Where would you put 8,500 homes in East Herts by 2031", but the Council headlines its consultation with the question: "How many homes do we need?", a question which it appears to have already answered. The entire document is based on the assumption that it must achieve the figures included in the East of England Plan Review and works back from there. Instead of asking "How many homes do we actually need in East Herts?", it is saying "These are the number of homes we have been told we need, how do we fit them in." This is precisely the approach that the Government has said it wants to stop.

In particular we question:

- 1 The basis on which the housing requirement figures have been calculated.
- 2 The housing capacity as set out in the consultation.
- 3 The approach to determining the broad locations for growth.
- 4 The assumptions on the need for Green Belt review.
- 5 The inclusion of proposals for expansion of Harlow.

- 1 The basis on which the housing requirement figures have been calculated.

The Housing Requirement figures are set out in Table 3.1 of the consultation document.

We do not argue that the calculations from which these figures are derived are wrong, but we do question the validity of just accepting the 'top down' East of England Plan figures, particularly knowing that the mandatory requirement for those figures will cease before the Council completes the Local Development Framework process. Nor do we consider it acceptable to simply say that "...any such changes will be taken into account and reflected as necessary

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before the Core Strategy is finalised.” (paragraph 3.2.19). By that time key decisions on the distribution of growth will have been made.

While we accept the Council’s comment that “A consequence of the abolition of the East of England Plan would appear to be the deletion of the district housing requirement. However, it should be stressed that whilst this would remove the figure as set out in the plan, it would not remove the actual requirement or need to build new homes in East Herts.” (para. 3.2.7), it is unfortunate that no attempt has been made to quantify the ‘actual requirement.’ As the Council itself notes ” ... following the anticipated abolition of the East of England Plan, the number of homes that East Herts must provide may reduce.” (para 3.2.19).

It would have been possible for the Council to have determined the ‘actual requirement’ as part of its preparation of this consultation from the studies it had commissioned to inform the LDF process. Had it done so, it would have been able to state definitively whether or not the housing figures would reduce.

The quantum of housing has a significant bearing on the decisions which people are being asked to make, not just on the broad options for growth, but on employment and social infrastructure, both of which are closely allied to the housing figures. The Council states that “The number of new jobs that we have to create is ... related to the number of new homes we have to provide....The starting point, therefore, is the district housing requirement.” (paras. 3.4.1/2). As the ‘actual’ housing requirement has not been determined, it follows that the employment figures and the land take associated with them, are similarly flawed.

The consultation assumes a need for up to 18,600 new homes between 2001 and 2031, based on the RSS (para. 3.2.18). The estimated population growth over the period 2009 - 2031 is 19,200 (para. 3.2.22). This suggests that the bulk of the new housing will be for single people, which is unlikely when compared to the demographic information which the Council commissioned as part of the LDF process, but does not refer to in the consultation document.

Another, more accurate and ‘bottom up’ approach would have been to take the demographic projections included in the Strategic Housing Market Assessment which the Council commissioned from Opinion Research Services in 2008. This breaks the population growth down into bands by age and could have been used to produce a more refined estimate of the likely need for family, single person, elderly sheltered and other types of housing. This would have not only produced more accurate overall figures, it would have assisted in assessing the appropriateness of the locations for that growth, the amount of land take which would be required and the timing of that land take .

We also strongly disagree with the statement that:”... the actual ‘to-find’ figure is perhaps less important than ... how the homes are distributed across the district. “(para. 3.2.20). The two are inextricably linked, together with the assessment of capacity. Without an accurate estimate of the number of houses to be provided and a clear assessment of the location and viability of sites to contain them, it is impossible to determine the most effective way to ‘distribute’ them across the District. Nor can the public make reasoned judgements on the Options presented to them.

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2 The housing capacity as set out in the consultation.

Table 3.3 of the consultation document schedules the 'Total theoretical availability of housing land in East Herts to 2031'. This is misleading, as it does not represent the total of potentially available sites in the District.

As paragraphs 3.5.1 to 3.5.5 explain, this table is based purely on "Call For Sites" put forward by prospective developers. It misses out a substantial number of urban development sites identified by ENTEC through the Housing Capacity Assessment which they carried out for the Council as part of the LDF process and which, like the Strategic Housing Market Assessment, is not referred to in the consultation document.

The Council argues that the 'Call For Sites', because they have been put forward by landowners, developers and other interested parties are therefore, theoretically, available for development. They have been "taken at face value" and "have not been assessed in terms of their suitability" (both para. 3.5.1). Notwithstanding this, the Council has based its options for areas of growth on these sites. In our view this is a naive and dangerous approach. The fact that a developer has put forward a potential site does not mean that that site is necessarily feasible or desirable for development. To rely on them in this way, purely because they are 'theoretically available', is a hostage to fortune.

In defining the quantum of available housing land, Table 3.3 gives precise areas and number of houses which can be accommodated in each of seven broad locations. The supporting text gives no explanation of how these figures were arrived at other than "Once we know how many new homes we have to build, we need to work out how much land would be required ... and it is dependent upon the density at which development is built." (para.3.3.1).

It was only by contacting the Council's Planning Policy Team that we were able to gain a clear understanding of how the figures were compiled. We were advised that they were simply based on multiplying the aggregation of the areas of the "Call For Sites" by a gross density of 20 dwellings per hectare (20dph). This gave a potential total of 29,642 homes. 20dph is a very low density (less than the Government's recommended minimum of 30dph), is not among the density options discussed in paragraphs 3.3.1 to 3.3.6. and no justification has been give for its use. We consider this methodology to be extremely crude and, taken together with the dubious status of the "Call For Sites", not one on which major decisions affecting the future of settlements should be based.

When it commissioned the Housing Capacity study from ENTEC, the Council stated that it wanted "to gain an accurate understanding of the urban capacity in the District", which makes it all the more puzzling why it has adopted the simplistic "Call For Sites" approach referred to above. In its response to that point the Planning Policy Team said that: "The Housing Capacity Assessment was a top down study that did not include any assessment of whether there is any intention by the owner to bring forward a particular site for development." (e-mail from John Careford dated 04/11/10). We accept that, but would respond that in their Addendum Report of March 2009, ENTEC did acknowledge that while it is unlikely that all of the capacity would come forward over the plan period, obviously some would, and they presented a range of scenarios ranging from minimum likely capacity to maximum likely capacity (Appendix B). Consequently we do not accept that it is sensible, or logical, to entirely dismiss an objective and accurate assessment of urban capacity for a 'theoretical' and untested one, and then to base all of one's

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decisions on that notional basis, simply because developers are likely to bring those sites forward. The two approaches give significantly different results.

By way of example, Table 3.3 gives a theoretical housing land capacity for Bishops Stortford of 1,330 dwelling units. Table 5.2 of the ENTEC study gives 6,306. Conversely, Table 3.3 gives a capacity for Sawbridgeworth of 3,222; ENTEC only 561. Such substantial discrepancies require explanation. Given the robustness of the ENTEC methodology, we are more inclined to accept their figures than the crude multiplying of speculative site areas by a notional density.

The Viability Analysis of the Strategic Housing Market Assessment breaks down the impact and viability of various densities on different housing types. Taken together, the SHMA and the Housing Capacity Assessment would have informed this exercise in a more meaningful manner. At the very least they would have allowed the “Call For” sites to be initially sifted for viability (as has been done as part of the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment by other Councils).

3 The approach to determining the broad locations for growth.

Much of our concern regarding the broad locations for growth flow from those outlined in sections 2 and 3 above. The Council has based its entire capacity assessment on the sites put forward through the “Call For” mechanism and goes on to state that “Following this Issues and Options consultation, we will agree our preferred approach and begin to assess the Call For Sites suggestions that conform to our preferred development strategy.” (para 3.5.2).

In other words, the decisions on the location of new housing will be based purely on unassessed sites put forward by those with a vested interested interest in their development. The objectively analysed sites reviewed by ENTEC will be ignored, and the public who are being consulted on the preferred broad locations for growth will not have the full information on which to base a judgement.

We have said above that this approach is a hostage to fortune. We assume that the Council will adopt a democratic approach and shape its development strategy around the growth options which the consultation demonstrates are those which the public prefer. What contingency does the Council have if the majority of “Call For Sites” in those growth areas prove unviable when retrospectively assessed?

4 The assumptions on the need for Green Belt review.

We agree that “Options should not avoid development in the Green Belt, since there may be good planning reasons for reviewing the Green Belt in some areas.” (para 3.7.8). However, those good planning reasons are not spelled out in the consultation document. Nor are the constraints to development in the Green Belt which are scheduled in Planning Policy Guidance note 2 (PPG2).

Instead, the Council’s position on the Green Belt is stated on page 4 of the Summary document accompanying the consultation: “It is unlikely that there will be enough brownfield land left within each town to accommodate all the homes we need, so we must also consider options for the outwards expansion of each town, which may require a Green Belt Review.” This is accompanied by a list of 13 potential areas of Green Belt Review, all of them extensions of

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existing settlements. No justification is given for this statement and the reviews which flow from it, beyond the statement that the Council "... is required by the East of England Plan to undertake a Strategic Green Belt Review as part of the LDF." (para 2.7.2).

Similarly, in the detailed presentation of the 'Broad Locations for Growth', there is the repeated statement that: "there is only limited capacity within the existing urban area of (Bishops Stortford... Buntingford ... Hertford ... Sawbridgeworth ... Ware...) to accommodate further development. Therefore whichever development strategy option is adopted, it is highly likely that (Bishops Stortford et al) will need to accommodate significant greenfield development beyond the current edge of the settlement." (paras. 4.5.3; 5.5.3; 6.5.3; 7.5.3 and 8.5.3). Again there is no evidence presented to support this assertion, nor is it, or the allied statement "We already know that there is insufficient capacity within these settlements to accommodate the required housing which means we may have to consider releasing some sites from the Green Belt" (para. 3.6.6) supported by the Housing Capacity study, which schedules out viable sites within the urban areas. As mentioned before, the ENTEC study is not referred to in the consultation documents and the average reader would have no knowledge of it. This is highly misleading.

Nor is an explanation given as to how the Council's position outlined above ties in with its proposed Strategy CHA1: "The whole rural area of East Herts functions as an important 'green bubble' and its openness should be maintained through the prevention of urban sprawl and inappropriate development and land use through the appropriate management of the Green Belt." and "...the Core Strategy should include policy options on ... maintaining the openness of the whole rural area including the Metropolitan Green Belt." (para. 2.7.13).

Development in the Green Belt should be the position of last resort. Consequently, we fully support the proposed approach to land availability: "... firstly, re-use of brownfield land within existing built-up areas, followed by the use of greenfield land within existing built up areas; and finally, the use of brownfield and greenfield land outside existing settlements." (para. 3.5.10). However, this begs the question of why the detailed ENTEC work on land within the built-up areas has been ignored and the land availability based on the "Call For Sites", which are primarily outside the existing settlements. This slants the consultation towards Green Belt reviews which may be unnecessary.

5 The inclusion of proposals for expansion of Harlow.

The Consultation document devotes a whole section to North of Harlow (Chapter 10), effectively restating the Harlow Options Appraisal which was prepared by the consultants Scott Wilson. As such, it rehearses five of the six development options put forward by the consultants. Like so much of the rest of the Consultation, these flow from the figures in the East of England Plan and do not take into account consideration of the actual development needs of Harlow, whether those needs can be accommodated within the existing Harlow boundaries or the level of development, if any, which may have to take place in East Herts.

Even if it was demonstrated that there is no need for Harlow to expand into East Herts, the Summary document says: "Acknowledging the revocation of the East of England Plan, we would like to know whether you think North of Harlow is a suitable location for development." (page 5). This is amplified in the Consultation document (paras. 10.6.10 and 10.6.11), effectively putting forward the area north of Harlow as a further broad area of growth.

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This would effectively create a new settlement entirely in the Green Belt which, for all practical purposes would be separate from Harlow. No justification for it is presented in the consultation document. Unlike the other proposed growth areas, there is no exposition of the advantages, disadvantages and further considerations of this option. This means that consideration of it can only be done on a subjective basis. Under all of the criteria set out in PPG2, we consider that area to be completely unsuitable for this type of development.

Growth Options.

Given the flawed nature of the methodology used to determine the quantum of housing, housing capacity and selection of growth areas, we believe it is not possible to give meaningful consideration to the Growth Options. In particular the use of notional figures drawn from the "Call For Sites" exercise and the omission of the ENTEC figures for the urban areas make it impossible to judge the true requirement for the major settlements and hence the residual requirement which may have to be met in the rural settlements and in the Green Belt. Consequently, we have declined to comment on the Growth Options.

Yours faithfully,



Kevin FitzGerald
Hon. Director