

Standing up for Hertfordshire's countryside

Planning Policy
Stevenage Borough Council
Daneshill House
Danestrete
Stevenage
SG1 1HN

Our Ref:

Your Ref:

24 July 2015

Dear Policy Team,

**Stevenage Borough Local Plan:
Revised Housing Targets and Green Belt Consultation 2015.**

Thank you for consulting CPRE Hertfordshire on potential revised Housing Targets and Green Belt Options for the new Stevenage Borough Local Plan. We have a number of comments that we would ask the Borough Council to carefully consider during the preparation of the draft Plan, and these are set out below.

Planning context for the Consultation.

The consultation focuses on two principal issues, the scale of the Borough's Housing Target, and the extent to which Green Belt boundaries should be changed. It is not possible to consider these issues without understanding the Planning context set by National Planning Policy, and the relationship between the Plan preparation processes for Stevenage and for its neighbouring local planning authorities.

In this regard CPRE Hertfordshire wishes to point out that, as stated in the consultation document (paragraph 2.2) it is for the Council to determine how many houses should be built in the Borough, and that this does not have to be as many as estimated to be needed by the Council's research into housing need and demand (paragraph 2.4). The latter paragraph also notes that one justification for setting a target lower than estimated housing need and demand, is the need to comply with paragraph 14 and footnote 9 of the NPPF. Paragraph 14 explicitly states that Councils should seek to meet objectively assessed needs '*unless specific policies in this Framework indicate development should be restricted*', with '*land designated as Green Belt*' given as a specific example of such a policy in the footnote.

Furthermore, as implied in paragraph 2.27 of the consultation document, the only actual requirement of National Planning Policy in terms of meeting estimated housing needs is for Stevenage to co-operate with other local planning authorities to consider how and where the housing need within relevant Housing Market Areas should be met, and how much of this should be within their areas.

The consultation document is therefore wrong to imply that the only way to meet all of Stevenage's Housing need after 2031 is to allow the development of Green Belt in the neighbouring districts of North Hertfordshire and/or East Hertfordshire. Meeting housing need in this way is an option that those Councils may consider in due course, but this is not the only way of facilitating the future construction of the number of houses estimated by the Council's consultants to be needed in the longer term. Indeed, paragraph 2.27 accepts that the Housing Market Area extends much farther, and includes for example, Central Bedfordshire. The impact of the Government's proposal to strengthen guidance on the duty to co-operate should also be taken into account, and we note that the Council will have an adequate opportunity to comment as necessary on the draft Plans of other planning authorities including but not limited to, its immediate neighbours.

Housing Targets.

CPRE Hertfordshire wishes to express concern about the range of Options set out in the consultation document. These seem to be based on inconsistent assumptions about the capacity of the Borough to accommodate housing development without the use of Green Belt land.

In particular Option A assumes 5,300 houses could be built in Stevenage without using Green Belt land, but Option B assumes that 6,100 houses could be built on non-Green Belt land. The only explanation of this difference is set out in footnote 23 of the document, that Option B '*will stimulate confidence in Stevenage and deliver sites and schemes that might otherwise yield less homes or not come forward at all.*' The significant difference between 5,300 and 6,100 houses in terms of impact on the Green Belt means that a clearer explanation of this difference is necessary, as one realistic option would at face value, be a Housing target of 6,100 dwellings. The document does not refer, for example, to the use of the various powers available to the Council to make land available for development, or the impact of the Government's proposals for automatic planning permission for residential development of brownfield sites.

The scale of assessed Housing need identified also appears to be misleading, because it includes an additional 14% (paragraph 2.61 and footnote 24) on top of the calculated need, mainly to respond to market demand. This increase is more than half of the difference between the 6,100 houses that the document states could be built without using Green Belt land under Option B, and the Option B total of 7,600 houses.

CPRE Hertfordshire therefore considers that the Borough Council should pursue a more modest Housing target for the Local Plan based on the avoidance of any housebuilding on currently designated Green Belt during the Plan period to 2031. Paragraph 2.71 refers briefly to other options considered by the Council, including one of '*around 6,400 homes*' but these are not considered in any detail in the document. Given the relaxation of controls to encourage housing development on previously-developed land in particular, we consider that more serious consideration of such an option should have been set out in the consultation document, and that it should be re-considered now.

In proposing a target that would not require the release of Green Belt land, the Council would be able to draw on national planning policy on Green Belt as set out in the NPPF and reinforced in the National Planning Practice Guidance on Housing Land Availability, that unmet housing need is unlikely to constitute very special circumstances for inappropriate development in the Green Belt (paragraph 34).

Recent court rulings have confirmed that a similar approach can be applied in the preparation of Local Plans. The Judge in the recent Calverton case (Calverton Parish Council v Nottingham City Council and others, Reference [2015] EWHC 1078 Admin), ruled that housing need on its own could not amount to “*exceptional circumstances*” to justify altering Green Belt boundaries (paragraph 50 of the Judgement). In paragraph 51 the Judge expanded more on what matters could constitute “*exceptional circumstances*”, and as he also pointed out, if housing need alone constituted “*exceptional circumstances*”, then the need to consider whether meeting such need is consistent with national policy, is circumvented. Hence, an important stage in the process is ignored and an approach which is “*illogical and circular*” is adopted.

Green Belt

Although paragraph 2.4 correctly points out that ‘*the Green Belt can be a reason to restrict the amount of development we allow to happen in the future*’, cross-referring to NPPF Paragraph 14, and therefore acknowledging that the Plan does not necessarily have ‘to fully meet the objectively assessed needs of the Borough’, this is not followed through in the Council’s preferred option.

The wording of paragraph 3.12 is of particular concern, by implying that the Council can claim either that no exceptional circumstances exist for releasing Green Belt land for 1,500 houses, or the such circumstances do exist, depending on which target is chosen. Either the evidence of exceptional circumstances exists or it does not. CPRE Hertfordshire does not consider that exceptional circumstances have been revealed by the Council in the consultation document or background studies, sufficient to justify any release of Green Belt in the Borough in the period to 2031.

This opinion is based in part on the extent of residential development potential on brownfield sites and within the existing urban area of Stevenage. That potential has been recently increased as a result of the latest Government proposals for further relaxation of planning controls over changes of use of previously developed land. This potential is additional to the 800 houses on non-Green Belt land that are included in the Council’s estimated capacity of 6,100 houses under Option B.

CPRE Hertfordshire is also concerned that Question 2 in the consultation document seems to be based on the assumption that in order to meet Stevenage’s longer term needs, the Green Belt boundary within the adjacent areas of East and/or North Hertfordshire Districts would need be changed, with the only question being whether those changes should be made now or later. Such an assumption is at odds with an approach based on the identification of how

housing needs can be met across wider market areas because of the Green Belt and other constraints that exist in Hertfordshire. We understood the Council favoured such an approach.

In our opinion a realistic and achievable option is the continued maintenance of the current extent of the Green Belt in the Borough, combined with the more efficient use of non-Green Belt land within the town, including urban regeneration, and that this will still enable you to meet as much of Stevenage's objectively assessed need as is appropriate in the context of current national policy.

Thank you again for the opportunity to contribute to the consultation, and please contact me on the above number if you would like to discuss any of our comments.

Yours Faithfully,



Steve Baker
Planning Manager