

By email to: blp@rbwm.gov.uk

25 September 2017

Dear Sir or Madam

London Green Belt Council response to The Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead's Local Plan consultation

The London Green Belt Council is a grouping of over 100 organisations representing over 50,000 people with a concern for the London Green Belt including CPRE Berkshire, the Society for the Protection of Ascot and Environs, Old Windsor Parish Council, Holyport Preservation Society and Holyport Residents' Association.

We consider the Local Plan to be unsound because it is inconsistent with National Policy and is neither sustainable nor justified.

We strongly object to proposals to release Green Belt in The Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead (RBWM) for housing and employment on the following grounds:

- Proposals to release large areas of Green Belt for housing developments are inconsistent with the NPPF and with Government policy, as stated by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government.
- The Green Belt sites proposed for housing meet the requirements as set out in the paragraphs on Green Belt purposes in the NPPF and their removal would compromise the integrity of the London Metropolitan Green Belt.

The following five points provide further detail about why we consider the Local Plan to be unsound.

1. The 100% Objectively Assessed Need (OAN) housing target is unrealistic and unachievable and does not take account of the Green Belt as a constraint

By proposing a housing target which is 100% of the OAN, the Local Plan is not compliant with national policy as it does not take sufficient account of Green Belt constraints on development. This is in direct contrast to the Secretary of State's 2016 statement that Green Belt should be '*absolutely sacrosanct*'.

In addition to the 83% of the Borough which is in the Green Belt, there are further significant constraints. 20% of the band is in Flood Zone 3 (high risk of flooding) while 15% of the Borough is owned by the Crown Estate, the vast majority of which (96%) is Green Belt. These constraints mean that a housing target of 100% of the OAN is unrealistic and unachievable and fails to provide the exceptional circumstances required to release Green Belt land for development.

The NPPF sets out clearly that objectively assessed housing needs do not have to be met, and therefore final housing requirements can be lower than the OAN where specific policies in the NPPF indicate development should be restricted.

The Local Plan ignores planning policy guidance which provides further clarity about the operation of the planning system in support of the NPPF.

“Once need has been assessed, the local planning authority should prepare a Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment to establish realistic assumptions about the availability, suitability and the likely economic viability of land to meet the identified need for housing over the plan period, and in so doing take account of any constraints such as Green Belt, which indicate that development should be restricted and which may restrain the ability of an authority to meet its need.”

This Government guidance has been amplified in further Ministerial Statements, including:

“The outcome of a Strategic Housing Market Assessment is untested and should not automatically be seen as a proxy for a final housing requirement in Local Plans. It does not immediately, or in itself, invalidate housing numbers in existing Local Plans.

Councils will need to consider Strategic Housing Market Assessment evidence carefully and take adequate time to consider whether there are environmental and policy constraints, such as Green Belt, which will impact on their overall final housing requirement.” Brandon Lewis, then Housing and Planning Minister, 19th December 2014

“We have been repeatedly clear that demand for housing alone will not alter Green Belt boundaries.” Brandon Lewis, Housing and Planning Minister, in a letter to all MPs for English constituencies, dated 7th June 2016:

2. Green Belt sites proposed for development perform strongly in relation to Green Belt purposes.

The RBWM Local Plan includes 48 sites in its housing allocations; over half (26) of which are in the Green Belt. This equates to 262ha (85%) out of a total land area of 305ha in the housing allocations. Although RBWM is claiming its loss only amount to only 1.7% of Green Belt land, these sites are of strategic importance to the Metropolitan Green Belt in its entirety. They include agricultural land, garden centres, education facilities and Maidenhead Golf Club.

The fact that the majority of the Green Belt sites proposed for development are on the edges of settlements mean that they are vital in holding back urban sprawl and the merger of towns, for example sites HA 11 and HA 18 (Land West of Windsor, north and south of the A308 and Land between Windsor Road and Bray Lake, south of Maidenhead) are comprised of land which prevents the merger of Maidenhead and Windsor, while sites HA6 and HA7 (Maidenhead Golf Club and Land south of Harvest Hill Road, Maidenhead) avert the coalescence of Maidenhead with Holyport and Bray.

As such, development of these sites is unsustainable, undermining the ability of the Green Belt to prevent incursion into the countryside.

3. RBWM has not proved that the benefit of releasing land within the Metropolitan Green Belt area outweighs the harm.

In preparing its Local Plan, RBWM has failed to take account of the significant harm of removing Green Belt for housing, despite there being a clear environmental and social impact for both the residents of RBWM as well as neighbouring authorities.

The strategic importance of the Green Belt sites proposed for development to the whole of the Metropolitan Green Belt RBWM is extensive. It includes removing legitimate Green Belt which exists to prevent urban sprawl and therefore ensure that towns do not merge, so safeguarding the countryside from encroachment, for recreational uses, environmental, health, amenity and social value.

Paragraph 44 of The Planning Practice Guidance states that:

'The Framework is clear that local planning authorities should, through their Local Plans, meet objectively assessed needs unless any adverse impacts of doing so would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits, when assessed against the policies in the Framework taken as a whole, or specific policies ... Such policies include ... land designated as Green Belt'.

<http://planningguidance.communities.gov.uk/blog/guidance/housing-and-economic-land-availability-assessment/stage-5-final-evidence-base/>

4. The methodology in the RBWM Green Belt Assessment is flawed

Two Green Belt studies are included in the evidence base for the Local Plan, 'Housing: Edge of Settlement Analysis' (January 2014) and *Green Belt Purpose Assessment* (July2016). These reports assessed Green Belt land bordering existing settlements and tested its suitability for release for development against a range of criteria. These studies and their use are flawed in three key ways:

- a. Green Belt land abutting existing settlements by definition fulfils the prime purpose of the Green Belt: to prevent urban sprawl.
- b. The Green Belt assessments should have been carried out in conjunction with neighbouring authorities in the housing market area, applying the criteria on a consistent basis across them.
- c. Given that Green Belt assessments should be carried out to examine how well land fulfils the purposes of Green Belt rather than as a means of identifying land for development, a comprehensive exploration of brownfield sites and opportunities for densifying existing settlements in the entire housing market area should have been undertaken in order to identify potential new sustainable settlements before Green Belt sites were recommended for development on the basis of the Green Belt assessments

The flawed Green Belt Assessment methodology has led to a lack of transparency about why some sites have been chosen over others and why others have been left out. It is not clear why some sites were consulted on and some were not – or why some sites which were consulted on have since had

their geographical boundaries expanded beyond those in the earlier consultations. It is relevant to note here that one of the prime reasons for the last Borough Plan being withdrawn in 2007 was because of a failure to carry out a full Green Belt review.

5. Focusing housing development on Green Belt land makes the Local Plan's Affordable Housing Policy (HO 3) unachievable.

The Borough maintains that the Plan will deliver the affordable housing needed particularly for young families and key workers. However, the Borough's chosen strategy makes even the unambitious 30% affordability target unachievable.

Recent history suggests that in an area like the Borough with high land values, it is very rarely possible to fund 30% affordable housing on a new development. Moreover, research by CPRE and planning consultants Glenigan, [*'Green Belt Under siege: 2017'*](#) demonstrates that Green Belt developments fail to produce significant numbers of genuinely affordable homes – only 16 % of homes built on Green Belt since 2009 have been affordable. By concentrating housing development on Green Belt, rather than increasing the density of existing developments and maximising the density of available brownfield sites, the Local Plan renders the 30% affordable target stated in HO 3 unachievable and will fail to meet the needs of young families and key workers.

Further evidence that the Local Plan's housing strategy renders the affordability target unachievable can be found in the Site Proformas. None of these Site Proformas list affordable housing as a *Requirement* or even a *Key Consideration*.

Proposed modifications.

The London Green Belt Council would like to suggest the following modifications:

- a. Revise housing targets to a more credible level, taking into account the Green Belt as a constraint to development.
- b. Instigate a more sustainable alternative to meeting housing need by undertaking a comprehensive exploration of brownfield sites and opportunities for densifying existing settlements in the entire housing market area in order to identify potential new sustainable settlements.
- c. Carry out a new purpose assessment of sites in the Green Belt, in conjunction with neighbouring authorities in the housing market area, which closely examines each site's role in curtailing urban sprawl and preventing the merger of towns.
- d. Include a higher proportion of affordable housing to meet the need for key workers, young families and young people in the Borough.

Yours faithfully

Richard Knox-Johnston
Chair
The London Green Belt Council