

WOKING SITE ALLOCATIONS DPD PUBLIC HEARING STATEMENT

A Statement Submitted by
Hook Heath Residents Association (HHRA)
(Reference No. 02141/2 (Representor ID))

Matter 3: *“Is the SADPD’s approach to allocations and safeguarded land in the Green Belt justified and consistent with national policy ?”*

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Matter 3: Is the SADPD's approach to allocations and safeguarded land in the Green Belt (GB) justified and consistent with national policy ?

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1. Issue (i) Does the Woking Green Belt Review provide a robust evidence base to support the policies and allocations of the SADPD ?

- 1 No, the Woking Green Belt Review does not provide a robust evidence base to support the policies an allocations of the SADPD.
- 2 Whilst changes to the Green Belt are required, by statute, to be “*fully evidenced and justified*,”¹ the Woking Green Belt Review proposes to release land from the Green Belt without the support of a sound evidence base.
- 3 As a consequence, the Site Allocations DPD supports the release of land from the Green Belt without appropriate justification and as presented, it cannot therefore be considered to be sound.
- 4 The Inspector is aware that Site Allocations DPD relies upon an evidence base that is founded largely upon the Woking Green Belt Review (January 2014) and the much later, retrospective Sustainability Appraisal Main Report (as updated 2019).
- 5 The Inspector is aware that the Woking Green Belt Review (January 2014) has, through previous consultations, been demonstrated to be flawed in respect of scope, methodology and output. Whilst wishing to avoid repetition of the detailed consultation responses, the Woking Green Belt Review relied upon an inappropriately lightweight and subjective “*Sieving Exercise*,” a vague, non-specific, generalised, non-substantive and subjective “*overview landscape assessment*” by Google Earth; a vague and obscurely weighted approach to Green Belt suitability; an absence of appropriate graining of parcels chosen and an inappropriate “*lumping together*” of starkly different landforms; a subjective, non-substantive and un-evidenced “*Sustainability Assessment*,” notable for its reliance on 2014 Google Maps travel-times regardless of site size and geography, its ambiguous use of subjectively identified destinations, including local centres, its unjustifiably loose use of weightings, its vague and incorrect assumptions re national policy, its sweeping, generalised conclusions, its failure to afford appropriate weight to the rigorously examined policies of the Core Strategy and so on.
- 6 Despite all of this and the intervening five year period, the Woking Green Belt Review has been continued to be relied upon as the main basis for the removal of sites from the Green Belt, regardless of criticism, including that made by neighbouring Local Planning Authorities.

¹ Paragraph 136, National Planning Policy Framework (2019).

- 7 As a direct consequence of an apparent “*carry on regardless*” approach, the SADPD proposes the removal of areas of land from the Green Belt unsupported by a robust evidence base. Not only is this contrary to national policy requirements, but it results in policies and allocations that propose the removal of land from the Green Belt in order for it to, apparently, provide for purposes that are not inappropriate in the Green Belt, as well as policies that appear incorrect, confusing and contradictory. It fails to provide for sustainable development.
- 8 As above, the Sustainability Appraisal Report (incorporating SEA and referred to below as the “SA”) forms another key element of the SADPD’s evidence base.
- 9 The SA was published in October 2018. Similarly to the flawed Woking Green Belt Review, parts of the SA appear to amount to a subjective and inappropriately “*broad-brush*” and retrospective attempt to justify the release from the Green Belt of pre-determined sites.
- 10 Rather than comprise a substantive, objective and transparent appraisal and comparison of potential Green Belt sites, the SA follows-on from the Woking Green Belt Review, such that it appears to provide retrospective justification for that Review’s outcomes. This has the unfortunate outcome of the SA seeking to justify an approach which itself lacks a robust evidence base.
- 11 Paragraph 19.8 of the SA states that:

“The SA and the Green Belt boundary review report complement each other in making decisions about the sites that should be allocated in the Site Allocations DPD.”
- 12 Despite this, the two Reports also contradict and appear in direct conflict with one another. By way of example, the Woking Green Belt Review recommended the removal of a large tranche of land, including land north of Saunders Lane and Hook Hill Lane, from the Woking Green Belt, whilst conversely, the SA, on page 102, states that:

“...exceptional circumstances do not exist so as to justify the release of the following sites from the Green Belt: Land to the north east of Saunders Lane and Hook Hill Lane, Mayford; Land to the north west of Saunders Lane and Hook Hill Lane Mayford...”

- 13 Having emerged from a flawed evidence base (the Woking Green Belt Review) and having apparently been predicated upon supporting the conclusions of this “*complementary*” evidence base - and even then, contradicting parts of that evidence base - the SA does not provide a robust and objective assessment.
- 14 Effectively, the SA ultimately seeks to justify the release of sites from the Green Belt for four main reasons: that the sites are capable of delivering housing; that they might reduce the need to travel by car; that they are outside areas of highest flood risk; and that they are relatively near to local centres. Unfortunately, exactly the same thing could be said of practically the whole of the Green Belt surrounding Woking. Neither the SA nor the Green Belt Review provide robust information to substantiate Green Belt release on the basis of clear, detailed and appropriate evidence.
- 15 The DPD has not emerged from and is not underpinned by, a sound evidence base.
- 16 The principal documents within the evidence base are deeply flawed, due to failings in their scope, methodology and conclusions; and a failure over the last five years to take opportunities to address these failings by responding in a positive and collaborative manner to constructive comments provided through consultation.
- 17 Also, in addition to not addressing matters raised in respect of the evidence base’s lack of robustness, the SADPD has failed to respond substantively to the significant changes introduced to national Green Belt policy by the 2018 and updated 2019 versions of the National Planning Policy Framework (“*the Framework*”). For example, the SADPD does not provide clear evidence to demonstrate how the impact of removing land from the Green Belt can be offset through compensatory improvements to the environmental quality and accessibility of remaining Green Belt land².
- 18 Whilst this is a matter considered in more detail in Section 2, below, it adds significantly to the gaps and lack of substance within the evidence base upon which the SADPD relies.
- 19 The policies and allocations in the SADPD are not supported by a robust evidence base.

² A statutory requirement (National Planning Policy Framework Paragraph 138).

2. Issue 3 (ii) Do the SADPD's GB allocations and policies accord with national policies and guidance, and do exceptional circumstances exist sufficient to justify the alteration of the GB's boundaries ?

- 20 Whilst there is a need for some Green Belt release around Woking in order to enable the Borough to meet its future development needs, this does not remove the Council's responsibility to ensure that changes to the Green Belt are made in a statutorily compliant manner. The SADPD's allocations and policies do not accord with national policies and guidance and this results in a document that is not sound.
- 21 As noted above, when reviewing Green Belt boundaries, plans are required to set out ways in which the impact of removing land from the Green Belt can be offset through compensatory improvements to the environmental quality and accessibility of remaining Green Belt land.³
- 22 National planning guidance⁴ is explicitly clear that where it is necessary to release Green Belt land for development, plans should set out policies for compensatory improvements to the environmental quality and accessibility of the remaining Green Belt land. Guidance provides examples of what compensation and improvements might comprise and recognises the importance to the process of "*early engagement with landowners and other interest groups.*"
- 23 There is little substantive evidence to demonstrate that such early engagement has taken place and helped to inform and support the SADPD and the evidence base from which it has emerged.
- 24 The national policy requirement for compensatory improvements was published during the first half of 2018. Further detail in respect of guidance was published in July 2018. This is some considerable time ago and yet there is a lack of substantive evidence to demonstrate how this statutory requirement has formed part of the Green Belt review process or how it will be delivered across Woking's retained Green Belt.
- 25 Given this, there is little to support a conclusion that sufficient, appropriate consideration has been given to this fundamental national policy requirement.

³ Paragraph 138, National Planning Policy Framework (2019).

⁴ National Planning Guidance "Green Belt" from Para 001 Reference ID: 64-001-20190722 (to 64-003-20197022).

- 26 In effect, sites appear to be proposed for removal from the Green Belt *regardless* of compensatory improvements to the Green Belt that remains. It appears to be an unknown factor as to whether or not the impact of removing land from the Green Belt – whether as individual sites or as the land proposed for removal from the Green Belt as a whole – would, or even can, be offset through compensatory requirements. The SADPD would appear to conflict with the requirements of national policy and guidance in this regard.
- 27 Further, it is not clear how compensatory improvements might work together with the somewhat confused approach to the provision of long term green infrastructure on land removed from the Green Belt, as proposed in the SADPD.
- 28 The confused and confusing approach to Green Belt release exemplified by SADPD Policies GB7 and GB9 (considered below) compounds the document's failure in respect of the above.

Policy GB7

- 29 National policy requires plans to be prepared positively in a way that is aspirational but deliverable and for policies to be clearly written and unambiguous⁵.
- 30 The hatched area of GB7, which excludes that area to the south containing a new school and providing for the expansion of Mayford, comprises land that serves important Green Belt purposes, adjoining Green Belt to the east and west. Remarkably, Policy GB7 seeks to remove this land from the Green Belt in order to "*safeguard*" it as a visual gap ! Given that the very point of Green Belt is to protect openness, this makes no sense.
- 31 Conversely, a common sense and logical approach would be to retain the "*hatched land*" in the Green Belt and demonstrate how it will be utilised for Green Belt compensatory requirements in association with the release of land to the south of the allocation.
- 32 The hatched land performs an important Green Belt function. Policy GB7's reference to protecting a visual gap is testament to this. It is beyond any reasonable doubt that the hatched land meets the purposes of Green Belt and should therefore be retained as such. The fact that it can, at the same time, seek to address compensatory improvements within the Green Belt, comprises a significant missed opportunity.

⁵ Paragraph 16, National Planning Policy Framework (2019).

- 33 Further to the above, Policy GB7 refers to GB9 as an adjoining site that provides scope for “*shared access*.” This is simply not the case. Sites GB7 and GB9 are distinct and entirely separated by the dual-tracked railway line to London Waterloo.
- 34 The railway line prevents any legal cross movement, whatsoever, between sites GB7 and GB9. It provides a definitive gap and a very clear physical boundary between sites GB7 and GB9. Whilst it maintains openness across the existing Green Belt between the northern parts of GB7 and GB9, it is not the case that GB9 provides any scope whatsoever for “*shared access*” with GB7. There isn’t even a footbridge between the two sites, let alone a “*shared access*.” The reference in Policy GB7 to site GB9 appears misleading and there is no substantive evidence to demonstrate that the Policy is deliverable, as required by national policy.
- 35 It is also noted that, in failing to retain an area of Green Belt between the main urban area of Woking and the expanded settlement of Mayford, the release of GB7 in its entirety results in the coalescence of settlements, contrary to the purposes of Green Belt.
- 36 The SADPD is not sound in respect of Policy GB7.

Policy GB9

- 37 Contrary to the requirements of national policy and guidance, Policy GB9 is neither clear nor unambiguous. The Policy seeks to remove land from the Green Belt in order to provide for long term green infrastructure needs between 2027 and 2040, whilst at the same time, providing for the land to be released for development in any upcoming Core Strategy or Site Allocations Review. As such, Policy GB9 appears confused, confusing and in conflict with itself. It is not sound.
- 38 In the absence of detailed information, it is not clear how the site can be allocated for both the development of “*long term green infrastructure*” and any form of development, should the land be identified for such in a Site Allocations DPD.
- 39 This results in a confusing Policy unsupported by evidence in respect of deliverability. There is no evidence, for example, to demonstrate how green infrastructure might be long term if it can be replaced by development, regardless of what needs any such unknown future development might need.

- 40 Policy GB9 appears neither clear nor deliverable and consequently, it is contrary to Para 16 of the Framework. It is not consistent with the development plan's requirements for sustainable development and it fails to provide for certainty in respect of sustainable development – as per the purpose of the development plan system.
- 41 No detailed information is provided in respect of the form that green infrastructure will take at GB9. There is no detail in respect of how green infrastructure will be delivered, how it will be resourced, who will deliver it, or when it will be delivered. There is nothing, in fact, to demonstrate that long term green infrastructure *can* be delivered at GB9.
- 42 Further, given that Policy GB9 provides for any long term green infrastructure to be replaced at any time with any form of development identified in a revised plan – regardless of what such development might be for - it would seem unlikely in the extreme that resources would be invested into the delivery of "*long term green infrastructure.*" There is no substantive evidence to the contrary.
- 43 Furthermore, in the absence of any detailed evidence or information, it is not clear how the provision of green infrastructure at GB9, were it ever to be developed, would relate directly to Woking's green infrastructure requirements. There is no substantive evidence in respect of quantification, deliverability or viability, nor any detail at all in respect of the type or form of the green infrastructure proposed at GB9. In fact, there is nothing to provide any degree of certainty in respect of long term green infrastructure ever coming forward. A vague reference to another Policy in another document does not address these matters.
- 44 Plans must be deliverable. Policy GB9 is not supported by appropriate evidence to demonstrate that this is the case. It is not sound.
- 45 In addition to the above, the land at GB9 is proposed for removal from the Green Belt in order to provide for a green infrastructure land use that is not inappropriate to and is compatible with Green Belt and its purposes. Simply retaining the land as Green Belt would achieve this, as well as support the sustainability of other parts of the SADPD.
- 46 In this regard, together with the northernmost part of GB7, land at GB9 combines with land to the east and north east to provide for a long term, defensible Green Belt. Without GB9 and the northernmost part of GB7, the remaining Green Belt in this area, as proposed by the SADPD, appears as a thin sliver of greenery that would fail to meet the purposes of Green Belt.

- 47 In addition to all of the above, there is also evidence, referred to in Section 3, below, that the removal of GB9 from the Green Belt is, in any case, unjustified.

3. **Issue 3 (vi)** *Are the SADPD's other GB allocations and policies justified and effective - GB9 is a safeguarded site to provide green infrastructure, given the nature of the proposal is removal of the site justified ?*

48 Policy GB9 does not clearly define boundaries using physical features that are readily recognisable and likely to be permanent. Rather, in seeking to compensate for a significant error in the previous draft document, the Policy now relies upon "*hatching*" approach across part of GB9, which itself serves to compound the confusing nature of the Policy.

49 A previous version of the DPD sought to remove land in this area from the Green Belt without evidence or justification. This land is now hatched and the proposed GB9 land is "*supported*" with the words:

"...the entire site, including the area hatched...is safeguarded for future green infrastructure needs...the hatched area of the site contains residential properties that will not be developed as Green Infrastructure."

50 Thus, according to the SADPD, the entire site including the hatched area is safeguarded for green infrastructure but the hatched area will not be developed as green infrastructure. This part of the SADPD makes no sense and is contrary to Paragraph 16 of the Framework and national planning policy guidance which requires policies in plans to be clear, precise, unambiguous and founded upon appropriate evidence.

51 Notwithstanding the evidence that Policy GB9 is not effective – as demonstrated above, the Policy is unclear, contradictory and is not supported by evidence to demonstrate that it achieves its purpose of providing green infrastructure – the removal of the site from the Green Belt is not justified.

52 National policy establishes that large-scale removal of land from the Green Belt requires clear, well-evidenced justification. Woking Borough Council has confirmed that *The Green Belt Boundary Review Report (2014)* "*informed the allocation of sites.*" This was a flawed Report and as evidenced above, the SADPD is not supported by a robust evidence base.

53 Sites GB9 and the northernmost part of GB7 provide a significant opportunity for the Council to meet its obligations in respect of the provision of compensatory improvements to the Green Belt that remains. The Council has not met this statutory duty. The SADPD provides the opportunity to reconsider the scope for GB9 and the northernmost part of GB7 to enhance Woking's Green Belt to best effect, in line with national policy, rather than propose their unnecessary and inappropriate removal from Green Belt, contrary to national policy.

4. **Issue 3 (vii)** *Does the SADPD's approach to safeguarded land accord with the Framework ?*

- 54 The SADPD's approach to safeguarded land does not accord with the Framework.
- 55 Paragraph 139 of the Framework requires safeguarded land to meet longer-term development needs beyond the plan period. In respect of Policy GB9, the SADPD attempts to safeguard land to meet long term green infrastructure needs between 2027 and 2040.
- 56 Such an approach, notwithstanding the additional, confusing and inappropriate elements of the Policy referred to above, is entirely unnecessary. The land at GB9 is perfectly capable of meeting green infrastructure requirements as Green Belt. Furthermore, good planning could ensure that the land at GB9 meets the Green Belt review requirement of providing for compensatory requirements within the remaining Green Belt.
- 57 Unfortunately, the SADPD has failed to address compensatory requirements in a satisfactory manner and is not sound.
- 58 However, Policy GB9 does not actually safeguard land for long term green infrastructure. Rather, it generates inappropriate uncertainty by providing for any form of development at any time, subject only to development plan review. It does not provide for any degree of certainty in respect of the safeguarding of GB9 for longer term green infrastructure.
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