

DACORUM BOROUGH COUNCIL SITE ALLOCATIONS EXAMINATION OCTOBER 2016

Written Statement Matter 4 - Housing: Inspector's Questions 3, 4 and 15 – Michael Nidd

I am Michael Nidd, Secretary of Piccotts End Residents' Association and local resident for 40 years.

Question 3: in the light of Government's stated objective in paragraph 47 of the NPPF of boosting significantly the supply of housing, should the council be seeking to constrain the release of the Local Allocations? If so, what is the rationale for this?

It is argued that the plan is contrary to what has been clarified as better representing Government objective and policy, and is therefore unsound. It is suggested that the way in which the Plan could be made sound is to put into abeyance any alterations to Dacorum's Green Belt pending a full review of, and consultation on, the Local Plan in the light of recent Government clarification about NPPF policy on development of Green Belt land.

The Core Strategy which included these Local Allocations was pushed through, despite the misgivings of some Councillors, while the ink on the NPPF was barely dry. Subsequently The Minister stated (17 January 2014) *“unmet need, whether for traveller sites or for conventional housing, is unlikely..... to constitute “very special circumstances” justifying inappropriate development in the Green Belt”*. A Communities Department press release, 4 October 2014 stated: *“Councils must protect our precious Green Belt”*. The Minister said *“The Government has been very clear that when planning for new buildings, protecting our precious green belt must be paramount..... Today's guidance will ensure that councils can meet their housing needs by prioritising brownfield sites and fortify the green belt in their area.”*

The Minister also reminded Councils (6 June 2016) that *“The Government has put in place the strongest protections for the Green Belt. The Framework makes it clear that inappropriate development may be allowed only where very special circumstances exist, and that Green Belt boundaries should be adjusted only in exceptional circumstances, through the Local Plan process and with the support of local people. We have been repeatedly clear that demand for housing alone will not change Green Belt boundaries. However, we recognise that it is local authorities, working with their communities and with detailed local knowledge, which are best placed to decide the most sustainable, suitable and viable sites for new homes”*.

In the “Calverton case” the judge said *“it would be illogical, and circular, to conclude that the existence of an objectively assessed need could, without more, be sufficient to amount to “exceptional circumstances” within the meaning of paragraph 83 of the NPPF”* (para 50 of the judgment). He expands more (para 51) on what matters could constitute “exceptional circumstances” – for example this could include the acuteness of the need, the constraints on the supply of land etc. As he points out, if housing need alone constitutes “exceptional circumstances”, then the need to consider whether meeting such need is consistent with national policy is circumvented.

In opting for Local Allocations, Dacorum Council advanced no very special or exceptional circumstances which justified removing any of the sites from the Green Belt. The availability of long-term undeveloped brown-field sites in and around Maylands, designated as “employment land”, as reasonable alternatives to Green Belt sites, was also ignored. In the context of community support, the residents of Piccotts End sent a petition to the leader of Dacorum Borough Council in which they objected to the development at Marchmont Fields (LA1), and the residents of Chaulden similarly petitioned against the development between Chaulden and Fields End (LA3). There is demonstrably no community support for either of these Local Allocations.

Question 4: Is it assumed that all sites, both commitments and allocations, will be developed during the Plan period? Are all of these sites likely to be developed? What account is taken of windfalls? What rate of windfall development is anticipated over the Plan period?

Study of planning applications over recent years shows a steady and useful flow of so-called “windfall” applications which have added dwellings numbers – around 90 each year over the past 5 years. However, since June 2013, when the planning regulations governing conversions from shops, offices and other commercial buildings to dwellings were relaxed, Dacorum Council has been notified of close to 550 **additional** dwellings: around 180 per year and not accounted for when the Core Strategy was proposed; becoming attainable by this route.

Also, partly resulting from pressure through initiatives by Hertfordshire Campaign to Protect Rural England,

some long-term undeveloped brown-field sites in and around Maylands, hitherto designated as “employment” sites, are now to become dwellings: just a few examples: Viking House on the corner of Redbourn Road and Swallowdale Lane (once the offices of Dexion but having lain empty for at least 10 years) but now to become 90 dwellings, the development by Hightown Praetorian of a one-time car dealership in Maylands adjacent to Wood End Lane, and the development of a factory and office in Ebbens Road which has produced 27 additional dwellings. There are several further long-term undeveloped brown-field sites in and around Maylands which, given the collapse in the commercial property market, could with benefit be considered for housing use.

If these gains continue at much the same rate, and there is no reason to doubt that they will, by 2031 there will have been a substantial **overshoot** of the housing provision target such that there would be no need to take any of the local allocations out of the Green Belt. It is suggested that when the Core Strategy is reviewed and these substantial gains, not accounted for when the Core Strategy was constructed, are recognised, this can be recognised by returning the sites to Green Belt status as “no longer needed for housing”.

Question 15: Are the allocations based on a robust assessment of infrastructure requirements and their deliverability, including expected sources of funding?

Surface Transport Infrastructure: there is forecast to be serious gridlock in several areas of Hemel Hempstead as a result of the totality of the development envisaged. In 2015 Herts CC and Dacorum Council jointly commissioned a run of the Hemel Hempstead Traffic Model by independent consultants and using validated data for trip generation. The model would not run to end using the validated data: hour-long gridlock on each weekday morning and evening “rush-hours” occurred at several key points, most of which are already known problem areas: Two Waters; the Fishery Road junction adjacent to the railway station; Breakspear Way (the main link from Hemel Hempstead to the M1 motorway); Link Road; Cupids Green roundabout adjacent to the proposed development at Marchmont Fields.

The only way by which the model could be made to run to end without gridlock was to assume a reduction in trip generation to 15% below that with which the model had been validated. Even then, extensive (and expensive) “tweaking” of junctions, roundabouts, traffic signals and other schemes would be required.

The additional traffic generated by relatively dense development at LA1 at an already problematic location, and in particular the proposal to create a further roundabout part-way along Link Road to form the only vehicular method of ingress and egress, renders that site particularly unsustainable.

A partial solution would be to put into abeyance any alterations to Dacorum's Green Belt pending a full review of, and consultation on, the Local Plan in the light of recent Government statements and clarifications as to policy over developing Green Belt sites.

These conclusions, also, took no account of the effect on local traffic flows at, in particular, the Cupids Green area of controversial proposal for 2500 dwellings by St. Albans City Council, along the Redbourn Road beyond Cherry Trees Lane, right on the edge of Hemel Hempstead. Much of the vehicular traffic from that site, if it were to proceed, is likely to flow via Cupids Green and around either side of Maylands, further exacerbating an already substantial potential problem.

Ends.