

East Hertfordshire District Plan Examination

09/17

Statement on behalf of The Woodhall Estate

Hearing Statement



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Part 1: Matter 5 - Hearing Statement

Introduction

1. This Hearing Statement has been produced on behalf of the Woodhall Estate (including the Woodhall Farming Company), a privately owned rural estate located between Stevenage and Hertford.
2. The Woodhall Estate is very extensive and includes land and property in and around Watton-at-Stone, a large village having some 2,300 inhabitants (950 households). The village is served by a railway station and supports a range of community facilities and services, including a Primary School and Doctor's Surgery.
3. The Woodhall Estate welcomes the opportunity to engage with the examination process, especially in relation to Matter 5 – The Development Strategy – The Green Belt.
4. The main issue identified by the Inspector to be examined is:

Has the Plan been positively prepared and is it justified, effective and consistent with national policy to release land from the Green Belt?

Responses to Inspector's Questions - Green Belt Release: Policy DPS3

Question 5

5. The District Council's Development Strategy is predicated on the basis that much of its unmet housing need will be met adjacent to Bishops Stortford, Hertford, Sawbridgeworth and Ware and the neighbouring towns of Stevenage and Welwyn Garden City. To accommodate this unmet need it is proposed to release land from the Green Belt.
6. In relation to the larger Group 1 Villages, such as Watton-at-Stone, which are in the Green Belt no release is proposed. Instead, Local Plan Policy VILL1 states that local communities will be encouraged to consider whether it is appropriate to amend the Green Belt boundary surrounding their village. Laudable as this intention is in terms of encouraging community involvement in the planning process, the review of Green

Belt boundaries is a matter for the District Council to consider as part of the Local Plan process which involves appropriate consultation and subsequent examination.

7. A Neighbourhood Plan is in the process of preparation for Watton-at Stone, however a pre-submission draft has not been published yet by the Parish Council's Neighbourhood Plan Steering Committee. The neighbourhood plan is therefore still at an early stage. The outcome of recent consultation events would however appear to suggest that there is recognition within the community that the use of previously developed land within the village will not be able to entirely accommodate its future housing needs. Consequently, there is an acknowledgement that use will need to be made of land surrounding the village which is in the Green Belt.
8. The Local Plan does not provide an indication as to how requests from parish councils to review Green Belt boundaries will be considered, if indeed there is ultimately an appetite to do so from a parish council. Such mechanisms might include an early review of the Local Plan in its entirety, or a focused review which deals specifically with the Group 1 Villages in the Green Belt. Given the importance attached to the Green Belt, and the provisions of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), clarity should be provided from the outset in view of the strategic implications that arise in relation to the overall delivery of the Local Plan. Further reviews are only likely to frustrate and delay the production of neighbourhood plans.
9. The provisions of Schedule 4B to the Town and Country Planning Act, 1990 and the NPPF are such that neighbourhood plans must be in general conformity with the strategic policies in the Local Plan. The identification of the Green Belt boundary is a strategic matter that would have to be resolved first before a neighbourhood plan sought to identify additional land for development. This position was made clear in the Government response to the DCLG Select Committee Inquiry into the Operation of the NPPF (February 2015) which indicated that,

"... the responsibility for a review of the Green Belt rests with the local planning authority and must be conducted through the local plan process of consultation and examination. The rationale for this approach is to ensure the Green Belt is considered in the round of all the other planning issues the Council is addressing in its Local Plan and on an authority-wide, and indeed a cross-authority basis where appropriate."

- 10.** While neighbourhood planning areas have been designated in two of the three Group 1 Villages in the Green Belt (Hertford Heath and Watton-at-Stone), one has yet to be made for Stanstead Abbots and St Margarets. The District Council can only encourage the remaining parish council to designate a neighbourhood area but there can be no certainty that it will take up the opportunity. In the circumstances, considerable doubt exists in relation to the ability of the Local Plan to deliver additional development within the Group 1 Villages within the Green Belt which is in itself reliant upon the production of neighbourhood plans.
- 11.** The Local Plan has not therefore been positively prepared as required by the NPPF nor can the intended approach be justified. Indeed, the approach is likely to be ineffective, leading to the under delivery of development.
- 12.** A separate Hearing Statement has been produced in relation to Matter 2 and in response to the questions raised on the approach to housing development in villages, however we would reiterate that Watton-at-Stone is a highly sustainable village which contains a wide range of shops, services, and facilities, including a Primary School and Doctors Surgery. It is served by a railway station which provides access to services to London (Moorgate) and Stevenage with onward connections to Cambridge and the North of England.
- 13.** Evidence submitted in support of our client's representations to the pre-submission draft Local Plan demonstrates, without wishing to prejudice the production of a neighbourhood plan for the village, that land is available for development which could accommodate around 125 dwellings in a highly sustainable land accessible location which, if allocated, would not compromise the purposes of Green Belt as set out in the NPPF.
- 14.** Part of the land was allocated within the Regulation 18 Draft Local Plan as a site suitable for development, however revisions to the Plan published at the Regulation 19 stage removed all allocations within Group 1 Villages, relying on sites within the larger settlements to deliver the bulk of the additional housing required. Our clients would submit that its land should be identified for development and that exceptional circumstances exist to allow its release from the Green Belt in view of the high level of unmet housing need that exists in East Hertfordshire.

Question 6

15. East Hertfordshire District Council commissioned consultants to undertake a Green Belt Review in 2015. Its conclusions were used to inform the strategic Green Belt releases adjacent to the District's major towns, however it should have also been used to help inform the process of Green Belt releases adjacent to Group 1 Villages such as Watton-at-Stone.
16. The area of Green Belt surrounding Watton-at-Stone was assessed as Parcel 6 in the East Herts Green Belt Review Final Report, which was published in 2015. Parcel 6 includes the land being promoted by our clients but additionally encompassed land on the eastern and southern side of the village.
17. The Green Belt Review concluded that the wider areas of land contained in Parcel 6 played a major role of achieving three of the Green Belt purposes: to check unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas, to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment, and to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns, while playing a slight or negligible role in preventing neighbouring towns from merging into one another.
18. The notion that Parcel 6 plays a major role in checking the unrestricted sprawl of large built up areas is incorrect, although it is acknowledged that the Green Belt does prevent encroachment into the countryside on the southern edge of the village which helps to preserve its character and the setting of its historic core.
19. To assess the contribution that our client's land makes to the Green Belt, consultants were commissioned to undertake a focused Landscape Visual Impact Appraisal and Green Belt Review. This assessment concluded that 'the Parcel [land at High Street, Watton-at-Stone] does not currently fulfil the functions of the Green Belt adequately.' It also confirmed that while the land had some attractive landscape and visual qualities, there was scope for mitigation which could be achieved through sensitive design thereby enhancing and softening the developed edge of Watton-at-Stone.



- 20.** In the light of this assessment our clients do not consider the Green Belt review process has been robust and that the proposal for the land at High Street, Watton-at-Stone would maintain a defensible Green Belt boundary.

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