

Barton Willmore on behalf of Andrew Cotton (Representor ID: R00375)

Examination into the St. Helens Local Plan

Matter 3

Matter 3: Spatial Strategy and Strategic Policies

Issue 1: Previously developed land and housing densities

Policy LPA02 refers to the re-use of previously developed land in key settlements being a key priority. Section 11 of the Framework refers to making effective use of land.

Q1 Is there any inconsistency between LPA02 and the Framework in relation to its approach to brownfield land?

1. No comments.

Section 3 of Policy LPA05 sets out the densities that housing development should aim to achieve depending on where the site is located. In response to preliminary questions the Council has suggested a MM to the policy (SHBC001 – PQ44).

Q2 Would Section 3 of Policy LPA05 ensure that optimal use is made of sites as set out in paragraph 123 of the Framework?

2. The Council have essentially suggested in PQ44 to merge points b) and c) above meaning that all urban sites will be expected to achieve a minimum of 30dph unless within or adjacent to either St Helens or Earlestown Town Centres, where minimum densities of 40dph will be required.
3. Our Client considers that the amended policy (as set out in PQ44) would achieve optimal use of sites as per paragraph 123 of the Framework and welcomes the degree of flexibility afforded by the policy. Achieving a minimum of 30dph should be achievable on most sites, including our client's site which forms part of allocation site 4HA.

Issue 2: Green Belt and Exceptional Circumstances

The Framework requires that Green Belt boundaries should only be altered where exceptional circumstances are fully evidenced and justified. The Council, in seeking to meet its housing and employment needs, suggest that sites on the

edge of settlements which are currently Green Belt, are required. In proposing such release, the Council suggests that there are insufficient sites within built-up areas.

Q3 Does the presence of Green Belt provide a reason for restricting the overall scale of development proposed by the Plan (paragraph 11. b) i of the Framework)?

4. No. Green Belt land should not restrict the scale of proposed development in St Helens given that there is limited availability of alternative sites.
5. It is noted that point bi) of paragraph 11 of the Framework provides that strategic policies should, as a minimum, provide for objectively assessed needs and the unmet needs of neighbouring authorities unless the application of policies in the Framework that protect areas or assets of particular importance provides a strong reason for restricting the overall scale, type or distribution of development in the plan area. Footnote 6 confirms that the Green Belt policies of the Framework are relevant to this consideration.
6. The new Local Plan provides an opportunity to assess the performance of the Green Belt, and review its boundaries in the context of the requirement for new housing and employment land. Notwithstanding our Client's position on the Borough's housing requirement (discussed in other Statements) it is clear that St Helens Council will not be able to meet all of its development requirements on brownfield sites alone and that exceptional circumstances exist to warrant a review of the Green Belt.
7. Our Client considers that whilst paragraph 11 of the Framework could be utilised as a mechanism for restricting the overall level of development proposed by the Plan, to do so would likely mean that the Council would be unable to meet the development needs of its residents and would fail to deliver the growth and economic prosperity it desires. The preparation of a new Local Plan provides the Council with an opportunity to review and strengthen its Green Belt boundaries, whilst also securing its current and future development needs.
8. Should the housing requirement increase (noting our Client's position regarding the housing requirement) it is considered necessary that additional sites, including areas of Green Belt, will need to be allocated for development over the Plan period, or safeguarded for future development beyond the Plan period.

Q4 Have, in principle, exceptional circumstances been demonstrated for the alteration of Green Belt boundaries?

9. Yes. The Council readily accepts that Green Belt land is required in order to meet the development needs of the Borough, and that suitable sites within the existing settlement boundaries would not sufficiently meet these needs (notwithstanding our Client's intention that said requirement should increase). As a result, the Council considers that it has been necessary to review the Green Belt within the Borough. Our Client considers that the need to plan for housing and employment growth, in order to meet development needs and deliver the growth and economic prosperity sought by the Council sufficiently demonstrates the exceptional circumstances required to warrant a review of the Green Belt.
10. Furthermore, these exceptional circumstances present an opportunity to plan for the development needs within the Plan period, and beyond, and so our Client considers that it would be prudent for the Council to use the evolution of this Plan to safeguard land for development to meet future needs and strengthen the Green Belt boundaries. Such an approach has the potential to ensure that further Green Belt land is not required for development in the future.

Q5 On the assumption that the housing and employment requirements are justified, has the quantum of Green Belt release been supported by proportionate evidence? For example, has effective use of sites in the built-up areas and brownfield land been fully explored, including optimising the use of such land?

11. Our Client reiterates their comments in respect of Q4 and notes that the Plan should allocate (and safeguard) sufficient land in order to be flexible in the event that there is an update in the housing requirement (on the basis of the economic evidence or as a result of increased demand following the adoption of the LCR SDS) or if allocated sites do not come forward at the rate envisaged. Such flexibility would allow the Council to maintain an adequate housing and supply, in line with the provisions of the Framework.

Q6 On a Boroughwide level is the methodology for Green Belt assessment robust and reasonably consistent with that used by adjoining authorities?

12. Our Client has no specific comments to make in this regard but considers the methodology that the Council have adopted for the Green Belt Assessment is robust and broadly consistent with the Framework.

Issue 3: The principle of safeguarded land being identified to meet longer-term development needs.

The Plan proposes removal of land from the Green Belt to provide safeguarded land to meet longer term housing and employment needs (paragraph 139 of the Framework refers). In response to preliminary questions the Council has sought to explain how the quantum of safeguarded land has been determined (SHBC – PQ45).

Q7 Are the proposals to identify safeguarded land between the urban area and the Green Belt justified to meet longer-term development needs?

13. No comments.

Q8 Has enough or too much land been proposed for safeguarding to meet longer-term development needs?

No comments.

Q9 In general terms is the safeguarded land in the right place to meet longer-term development needs?

14. No comments.

Q10 Are the terms of Policy LPA06, particularly in relation to the release of safeguarded land, consistent with national policy?

15. No comments.

Issue 4: Compensatory improvements to Green Belt land

Paragraph 138 of the Framework requires that Plans set out ways in which the impact of removing land from the Green Belt can be offset through compensatory improvements. In response to preliminary questions the Council has sought to explain how the Plan will deliver these improvements (SHBC – PQ47).

Q11 Taking into account the Council's initial response, is the Plan clear on how it would intend to deliver compensatory improvements?

16. Our Client notes the Council's response to PQ47, which details a number of compensatory measures, including through the already adopted Bold Forest Park Area Action Plan (AAP). The Council also confirm in their response to PQ47 that compensatory improvements will be

also addressed on a site by site basis with the main compensatory improvements likely to take the form of expanding and improving public rights of ways in and around proposed development sites, providing opportunities for outdoor sport and recreation on previously inaccessible Green Belt sites, providing woodland and ecological network links, improving access to existing sites and retaining and enhancing landscapes, visual amenity and biodiversity. Furthermore, the Council confirm that compensatory improvements will also be delivered through policies LPA09, LPA11, LPC07, LPC08 and LPC09. Our client supports the Council in this regard.

17. The Council's response to PQ47 specifically refers to Site 4HA relevant to our Client's Site whereby the Council seeks compensatory improvements to the Bold Forest Park including tree planting, enhanced pedestrian and cycle connectivity and to be in line with the AAP. This is reflected at Appendix 5 of the Plan which requires Site 4HA to provide a well-landscaped setting including extensive green links promoting the objective of the Bold Forest AAP of increasing tree coverage by 30%. Our Client generally supports this position and our Client's Site provides an excellent opportunity for green infrastructure enhancements which aligns with the Bold Forest AAP. As per our representations to the Submission Draft, our client has submitted a Development Framework document which sets out how such measures can be provided for as part of the development of the northern part of Proposed Allocation 4HA. This is available to the Inspector and provides evidence as to how such measures can be delivered on site.

Q12 On the assumption that the Plan's policies should set out ways that such compensatory improvements would be achieved, what modifications would be necessary?

18. We do not consider there is a need for further modifications to the Plan.

Issue 5: The spatial distribution

Policy LPA02 identifies a number of key settlements for the focusing of regeneration and growth. However, concerns have been expressed that the distribution of development through allocations does not reflect the size and sustainability of settlements or that allocations are on the periphery of these key settlements.

Q13 Is the spatial distribution of development within the Plan justified?

19. Yes. Our Client agrees with the Council's approach in that the majority of new development

should be focused towards the most sustainable areas and agrees with the Council that Green Belt releases land are required in order to meet the Borough's development needs.

20. Notwithstanding this, our Client considers that the wording of the Policy should be amended to specify that meeting development needs will necessitate development both in, and *around* the aforementioned Key Settlements. This is because sufficient development cannot be located within the existing settlement boundaries alone.
21. Our Client questions whether the spatial distribution would be better expressed as a settlement hierarchy, with St Helens at the top of the hierarchy and defined minimum targets for development for each settlement.
22. As stated previously, our Client considers that an uplift in the housing requirement is justified to meet the needs of all areas in the Borough and so the Council should seek to allocate additional sites in order to address this.

Q14 Has the spatial distribution had regard to the impacts on climate change, including CO2 emissions?

23. No comments.

Issue 6: Site Selection

Paragraph 4.6.10 of the Plan summarises the approach to the selection of sites to be removed from the Green Belt to meet development needs. The GB assessments referred to under Issue 2 are an important part of this process but other factors such as accessibility, infrastructure and deliverability have been taken into account (see also paragraphs 6.24 – 6.28 of SD026 and SD020).

Q15 Taking into account the range of factors considered in site selection, has the Council's approach been robust, positive and justified?

24. Yes. Our Client is generally supportive of the approach the Council has taken in the selection of sites, notwithstanding their previous comments in relation to the spatial distribution of development sites and the requirement for additional sites to be allocated.
25. The Plan confirms that sites have been identified on the basis of their scope to be developed whilst minimising harm to the overall function of the Green Belt, and their suitability for development in other respects. This represents a balanced assessment to site selection. The criteria used have included their physical suitability for development, accessibility by sustainable transport modes to services and facilities, levels of existing or potential future

infrastructure provision, their economic viability for development, and the impact that their development would have on the environment.

Issue 7: Policies LPA03 and LPA01

Policy LPA03 sets out development principles that form the basis for more detailed policies of the Plan.

Q16 Is Policy LPA03 consistent with national policy and effective?

26. LPA03 provides a broad set of Development Principles. We have no objection to the inclusion of these principles, although the subjective nature means that it will be difficult to use LPA03 on a development control basis.

Policy LPA01 (Presumption in Favour of Sustainable Development) seeks to replicate paragraph 11 of the Framework. However, the PPG advises that ‘there is no need for a plan to directly replicate the wording in paragraph 11 in a policy’. The Council has agreed to delete the policy. However, it is noted that some representors support the policy.

Q17 Is Policy LPA01 necessary for the soundness of the Plan?

27. No comments.