

Examination of the Sevenoaks District Local Plan

Inspector: Karen L Baker DipTP MA DipMP MRTPI

Programme Officer: Louise St John Howe

FAO: Mr James Gleave, Strategic Planning Manager

Dear Mr Gleave,

I would firstly like to thank the Council and all other participants for their helpful contributions to the recent Local Plan Examination Hearings, which dealt with matters relating to Legal Compliance, including the Duty to Cooperate; Sustainability Appraisal; Strategy for Growth; Green Belt; Housing Need, Requirement and Distribution; and, Housing Supply. I would also like to thank Louise St John Howe, the Programme Officer, for her help in ensuring that the practical arrangements for the Hearings ran smoothly. Given that there are further Hearings arranged in a few weeks' time, I felt it necessary to write to you as a matter of urgency to set out my initial thoughts on the way forward with the remainder of the Examination.

In the light of the evidence that I have read and heard in the Examination, including the suggested Main Modifications to the Plan put forward by the Council and others during the Hearings, I have significant concerns about a number of aspects of the Plan, both in terms of legal compliance and soundness.

My main concern relates to the lack of constructive engagement with neighbouring authorities to resolve the issue of unmet housing need and the absence of strategic cross boundary planning to examine how the identified needs could be accommodated. Indeed, the Council did not formally ask neighbouring authorities if they were in a position to address its unmet housing need until just before the Local Plan was submitted for Examination. I am not satisfied, therefore, that the Council has addressed this key strategic matter through effective joint working, but has rather deferred it to subsequent Plan updates. This is evidenced by the 'actions' set out in the Statements of Common Ground with neighbouring authorities submitted to the Examination. I consider this to be a significant failure in the Council's Duty to Co-operate. Any failure of the Duty to Co-operate cannot be rectified during the Examination and therefore the only option is for a Report recommending non-adoption to be issued or for the Plan to be withdrawn from Examination.

Furthermore, I have significant concerns about the soundness of the Plan in respect of a number of areas including the approach to Sustainability Appraisal, the chosen Strategy for Growth, the assessment of the Green Belt and housing supply and distribution.

I am currently preparing a letter setting out my concerns in more detail which will be with you shortly. I will not reach any final conclusions on the way forward for the Examination until I have had the opportunity to consider your

response to that letter. However, whilst I acknowledge the need and desirability for the Plan to be found sound and legally compliant where possible, subject to any required Main Modifications, I consider it is necessary for me to advise you that, at this point, I consider the most appropriate way forward for the Sevenoaks District Local Plan would be for the Council to withdraw it from Examination.

Although there are a number of outstanding matters upon which the Council was intending to submit further information or evidence, these would not affect my conclusions on the Duty to Co-operate. In view of this, it would clearly be inappropriate to hold the Hearings arranged for November. Consequently, I have asked Louise to cancel them and to place this letter on the Examination website for information.

I understand that the Council has put a significant amount of work and resources into the preparation of this Plan and will be very disappointed by the contents of this letter. However, I have not reached these conclusions lightly and have only done so after giving you every reasonable opportunity during the Examination process to address my concerns.

Yours sincerely,

Karen L Baker

Inspector

14 October 2019