



Woolf Bond Planning

Chartered Town Planning Consultants

Tunbridge Wells local plan

Local Plan Proposed Modifications to the Development Strategy, January 2024

Representations made on behalf of Castle Hill Developments Limited.

On behalf of our clients, Castle Hill Developments Ltd, we make the following headline points in relation to the Tunbridge Wells Local Plan Proposed Modifications to the Development Strategy and accompanying sustainability appraisal addendum.

Tudeley Village (Main Modification SLP Mod 9)

We support the removal of the Tudeley Village allocation (policy STR/SS3), but record that for the reasons provided by the local plan Inspector that the spatial strategy and associated allocation for development at Tudeley Village should not feature in either this local plan or its immediate review.

Policy STR1 (Main Modification SLP Mod 3)

We note the amendment to the plan to now relate to a 10-year plan period. This clearly is in conflict with the NPPF at paragraphs 22 and 69. This national guidance highlights the importance of a plan lead system and the need to plan with varying degrees of certainty over the medium to long term. This is particularly important having regard to the nature of different development requirements, the need for these to be planned and delivered bearing in mind the long lead times required to deliver strategic development. This includes not only housing but also education and employment in order to create a sustainable and interrelated land use strategy for the borough. In other words, the failure of the plan to look beyond a 10-year plan horizon will impede on planning for the immediate future. The time taken for a local plan review and then implementation of a subsequent allocation strategy may lead to development needs being delayed when they are needed the most. For these reasons, if the plan is not to cover a minimum of 15 years from adoption with appropriate allocations to support the variety of different land use requirements that arise within this period it is essential that this matter is addressed through an immediate local plan review. The importance of this issue is such that it should be enshrined within development plan “uppercase” policy. Without this, the decision to curtail the current local plan and its medium/long-term development strategy on the basis of a local plan review lacks any teeth and commitment. It should represent development plan policy that transgresses local council administrations for the benefit of the borough and its residents as a whole.

A similar issue has arisen in Barnet in respect of their Local plan. The Inspectors’ published interim findings and next steps in August 2023¹ stated:

¹ <https://www.barnet.gov.uk/sites/default/files/EXAM%20143%20-%20Inspectors%27%20Interim%20Findings%20and%20Next%20Steps%20Letter%20-%20August%202023.pdf>

“Approach to the Plan Period and Requirement for Early Review.

The Plan as submitted would not provide a full 15-year period from the date of adoption. However, to achieve a 15-year post adoption period would inevitably necessitate the preparation and updating of existing evidence and, therefore, a considerable and undesirable delay in getting the Plan in place. A suitable alternative is to adopt the Plan at the earliest opportunity with a MM required to provide a firm commitment that the Council will undertake an early review of the Plan with the timetable for the preparation of its replacement, together with any Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs) identified in the Plan and new Area Action Plan Development Plan Documents (DPDs). The MM should be clear that this will be set out within a new Local Development Scheme (or other document of equivalent status) within a year of its adoption.

In addition, to ensure that the Plan will be effective in meeting its strategic objectives, the approach to early review should also incorporate changes to Table 24 to provide additional monitoring indicators, performance triggers and actions (including where necessary bringing forward the timetable for a partial or full review of the Plan). This should include changes to reflect the MMs to other parts of the Plan and new indicators as set out in the Appendix”.

A commitment to an immediate review is requested in light of the Local Plan not having a full 15-year period from the date of adoption in order for the local plan to be found sound. We would therefore propose that Policy STR1 itself is amended committing the Council to undertake an immediate review of the local plan with a timetable for the preparation of its replacement including a new Local Development Scheme (or other document of equivalent status) within a year of its adoption.

Consequently, the last paragraph of the policy should be amended as follows:

“Following adoption, the Council will undertake an immediate ~~early~~ review of the Local commencing with the preparation of a new Local Development Scheme (or other document of equivalent status) within 6 months of the Plan’s adoption, which will include further investigation of ways of meeting identified housing needs for the period post 2034. A new Local Plan meeting the identified housing needs post 2034 will be submitted for examination within 2 years of the Plan’s adoption.”

Green Belt

We note in the local plan Inspector’s initial findings and the Council’s response to it that the recommended additional Green Belt stage 3 study addendum comprising a finer grained Green Belt assessment did not include assessment of one of the largest land parcel on the northern edge of Royal Tunbridge Wells which includes the Castle Hill proposal.

The Council will recall our representations at the regulation 19 stage, our written statement to the EIP, and our evidence at the EIP itself in relation to the Sustainability Appraisal, and the absence of assessing all reasonable alternatives, including the Castle Hill development option. It appears that the more detailed Green Belt stage 3 study addendum has been confined to the

original scope of the Sustainability Appraisal as opposed to a more objective assessment of the Green Belt within the borough as a whole, whether the land had been subject to promotion or not. The object of the exercise should have been to identify the least performing Green Belt and then ascertain if it represented an acceptable and sustainable development parcel. The failure to include land on the edge of the Borough's principal settlement in this assessment is wrong.

We expect that this matter to be addressed properly through the immediate local plan review when addressing alternative strategies for medium long term development growth.