

St Albans City & District Local Plan 2020-2036

Examination Hearing Statement

Matter 8 – The Supply and Delivery of Housing Land

Prepared by Strutt & Parker on behalf of Taylor Wimpey Strategic Land

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Context and Introduction

1. Strutt & Parker has participated in the preparation of the St Albans City & District Local Plan ('the Local Plan'), on behalf of Taylor Wimpey Strategic Land (Representor ID 1187472) and in relation Land at Hill Dyke Road, Wheathampstead ('the Site').
2. Such participation included representations on the St. Albans City and District Detailed Local Plan Publication Draft 2018 ('the LPPD'), which was published for consultation under Regulation 19 of the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012. A copy of our LPPD representations were appended to our Matter 1 Hearing Statement.
3. Prior to representations on the LPPD, submissions were also made on the St. Albans City and District Local Plan Regulation 18 consultation.
4. We have set out concerns in our representations that the LPPD will not ensure a sufficient supply of housing to meet development needs (particularly in the short-term), nor does the proposed strategy continue sufficient flexibility to respond to rapid change and still meet development needs. As set out in our representations, allocation of the Site is considered to afford the opportunity to deliver a sustainable extension to the settlement of Wheathampstead and help cure such defects in the current strategy.
5. This Hearing Statement concerns Matter 8 (The Supply and Delivery of Housing Land) of the Local Plan Examination Stage 1 Matters, Issues and Questions (ED26).
6. The Inspector has identified the main issue of Matter 8 to be whether the approach towards the supply and delivery of housing land is justified, effective and consistent with national planning policy.
7. Further to the identification of this issue, 14 separate questions have been set out. This Hearing Statement provides responses to eight of these: Questions 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 14.

Question 4

Is the housing trajectory realistic?

8. The housing trajectory set out at Appendix 2 of the LPPD is considered highly ambitious. We note that the trajectory projects completions from strategic allocations, currently in the Green Belt, from 2022/23.
9. Once, and only if, the Local Plan is successfully progressed through to adoption, planning applications will still be required to be made and permission obtained before any development can commence. The planning application process normally takes a considerable amount of time for strategic developments such as those proposed through the LPPD, and is likely to entail achieving outline permission followed by reserved matters.
10. Once, and again only if, planning permission has been granted, there are still a number of potentially time-consuming actions required prior to the commencement of development. This includes the discharge of planning conditions, meeting S106 obligations, and agreeing S278 requirements.
11. Finally, once development has commenced there is clearly still a period of time before dwellings are completed.
12. The 2016 study 'Start to Finish - How Quickly do Large-Scale Housing Sites Deliver?' by Nathaniel Lichfield & Partners identified that the average period from validation of a planning application to delivery of the first dwelling was over 5 years for sites of more than 500 dwellings.
13. It should also be recognised that when the LPPD, including trajectory, was prepared, the Council's Local Development Scheme assumed examination in summer 2018 and adoption in spring 2020. Evidently, the timetable has slipped.
14. Even if one were to assume adoption of the Local Plan before the end of 2020 the trajectory is still highly optimistic. Then, reliance on completions from strategic allocations from any time earlier than 2025/26 would appear to represent a risky strategy.

Reliance on an approach to meet development needs which is imbued with significant risk is the very antithesis of what the NPPF calls for; the strategy to meet development needs should be sufficiently flexible to respond to rapid change. It is therefore necessary for the Council to allocate a number of small/medium sized sites that can deliver housing within the first five years of the Plan period.

Question 5

The majority of the proposed housing will be provided on a small number of large sites. Does the Council have a contingency Plan should one or all of these sites not deliver as expected?

15. There must be a contingency plan to account for the possibility that one or more of the strategic sites does not deliver as expected. The contingency should be incorporated within the Local Plan strategy itself.
16. The LPPD does not propose a strategy which is sufficiently flexible to be able to respond to one or more strategic sites failing to deliver as expected, contrary to the requirements of the NPPF.
17. The only contingency within the LPPD would appear to be the preparation of another new Local Plan. We consider this would be a wholly unsuitable approach to rely upon for a number of reasons:
 - a. It is an express requirement of the NPPF that the Local Plan strategy to meeting development needs itself should be sufficiently flexible to address changes in circumstances, negating the need to prepare a new Local Plan each time there is a change in circumstances.
 - b. The preparation of a new Local Plan can take considerable time. The Council has not adopted a new Local Plan since 1994. The review and preparation of a new Local Plan cannot be relied upon to respond to potentially rapidly changing circumstances.
 - c. The District is predominantly Green Belt. Any further review of the Local Plan is highly likely to require further alterations to the Green Belt boundary. The NPPF

is clear that alterations to the Green Belt boundary should be such that the revised Green Belt will endure *beyond* the plan period, i.e. in making the proposed changes to the Green Belt boundary through this current Local Plan, the Council must demonstrate that it will not be necessary to review them again until *after* 2036.

- d. If one or more of the strategic sites does fail to deliver at the anticipated rate it is most likely that the impact on the housing trajectory will be in the short term. This will further compound the recent undersupply of housing in the District.

Question 6

Has there been persistent under delivery of housing? In terms of a buffer for a five year supply of housing sites, should this be 5% or 20% in relation to para 73 of the NPPF?

- 18. Yes. The NPPF clearly defines significant under delivery as where the Housing Delivery Test (HDT) reports that delivery was under 85% of the requirement over the previous three years. The Housing Delivery Test: 2018 Measurement is the most recent available, and confirms that between 2015 and 2018, only 58% of the District's housing requirement was met.
- 19. In light of the above HDT result, and anticipating a similar outcome in the 2019 Measurement (expected to be 61%), a 20% buffer should be applied.

Question 7

What are the implications of stepped delivery of housing on the supply and delivery of housing?

- 20. The use of a stepped trajectory, where development targets for the early years of the plan period are proposed to reduced, is a concern as a matter of principle.

21. It should not be overlooked that the stepping of the housing trajectory in such a way is a mathematical construct which enables the impression of housing needs being met to be given; whereas the actual position, relative to the underlying demographics, is that they are not.
22. Delaying the provision of homes is also clearly at odds with the NPPF: its call for the supply of housing to be significantly boosted and for the maintenance of a housing land supply sufficient to meet five years' worth of need.
23. The PPG¹ explains that there are circumstances where the stepping of the housing trajectory may be appropriate. Examples given as to when it may be appropriate include significant change in the level of housing requirement between emerging and previous policies and / or where strategic sites will have a phased delivery or are likely to be delivered later in the plan period. The PPG² also stresses that in reviewing and revising policy, policy-makers should ensure that there is not a continued delay in meeting identified development needs.
24. In the case of St Albans, there has already been continued delay to meeting identified development needs.
25. The Council has not been able to adopt a Local Plan which could seek to address housing requirements since 1994, and reports³ an average of just 381 dwellings completions per annum between 1994 and 2017.
26. The London Commuter Belt (West) Strategic Housing Market Assessment 2008 (commissioned by the Council and others) identified a housing requirement for the District of 7,000 dwellings between 2007 and 2021 – an average of 500 dwellings per annum. Since that time, the District has averaged just 347 dwellings per annum.

¹ Paragraph: 021 Reference ID: 68-021-20190722

² Ibid

³ Local Plan Authority's Monitoring Report 2018

27. A 2013 assessment⁴ of housing needs for St Albans suggested an average of 586 dwellings per annum between 2011 and 2031 were required. Since 2011, the Council reports⁵ that an average of only 354 dwellings per annum have been delivered.
28. There has been a continued failure to meet housing needs, resulting in an ever-increasing cumulative deficit, and a failure to ensure that an up-to-date Local Plan is in place to address this. The further, and planned for, delay in meeting housing needs as proposed by the stepped trajectory is therefore completely inappropriate considering an acute need for market and affordable housing in the District.
29. In addition to being inappropriate, the approach is also unnecessary. The stepping of the trajectory is not a result of a lack of potential sites that could deliver within the early years of the plan period, but rather a result of the LPPD's failure to propose allocation of such sites based on a wholly inappropriate strategy. The requirement to step the trajectory is a function of the LPPD's proposed strategy – a strategy that is neither justified nor effective - as opposed to being a requirement born out of local circumstances which necessitate such an approach.

Question 8

What impact will this have on the 5 year supply of deliverable housing land and the delivery of affordable housing?

30. For the reasons set out within our response to Question 7, the stepping of the trajectory will result in actual housing need (including affordable housing need) going unmet.
31. It would not be acceptable, and particularly in light of the prolonged under delivery in the District, for the local plan to be adopted without a deliverable five-year housing land supply. Sites that would form part of a local authority's five-year land supply calculation must be judged to be deliverable (in line with the revised National Planning Practice Guidance on Housing supply and delivery – July 2019) and, as previously set out against

⁴ Independent Assessment of Housing Needs and Strategic Housing Market Assessment: St Albans City and District Council

⁵ Local Plan Authority's Monitoring Report 2018

Question 4, there is a significant risk that some of the larger allocated sites will not deliver – and certainly not at the anticipated rate – in the first few years following adoption of the Plan.

Question 9

On the basis of the Plan as submitted, is it realistic that it would provide for:

a) A supply of specific deliverable sites to meet the housing requirement for five years from the point of adoption?

32. The LPPD housing trajectory projects a total of 3,401 dwelling completions between 2020/21 and 2024/2025 – an average of 680 per annum.
33. As noted in our response to Question 4, the trajectory relies upon lead-in times for strategic growth sites which are highly optimistic. Of the projected 3,401 additional dwellings within the first five years, 1,145 are from strategic sites (500+ dwellings). For the reasons set out in our response to Question 4, it is not feasible to rely upon such sites to contribute to the five-year supply to such an extent.
34. We also note the high delivery rates for sites identified in the five-year supply, reaching as high as 140 dwellings per annum. We suggest that it will be important for the Council to demonstrate such a delivery rate can be relied upon.
35. Having regard to the above, we do not consider that the LPPD will meet the five-year requirement that the Council proposes. It should also be recognised that, as per our response to Question 7, this requirement is in any case an arbitrary figure, substantially below the actual requirement. The LPPD's suggested five-year requirement for 2020/21 – 2024/2025 is 2,825 (based on 565 dwellings per annum). The actual, minimum, five-year requirement⁶ is 5,376 dwellings.

⁶ Applying Standard Method. 2014-based SNHP average annual increase in household 2019-2029. 2018 affordability ratio (published 2019).

36. In respect of the LPPD's proposed housing requirement, we do not consider there is a reasonable prospect of the five-year requirement being met. In respect of having a supply of specific deliverable sites that could meet the actual housing requirement for five years from the point of adoption, the LPPD does not even purport to meet this.

If you contend that the Plan would not provide for either (a) or (b) above (or both) could it be appropriately modified to address this?

37. There are sites that are not proposed to be allocated by the LPPD which are suitable, available and achievable for residential development; capable of delivering within the first five years of the plan period; and would contribute to sustainable patterns of development. Whether such sites can deliver the District's housing requirement in the early years of the plan period in full, or simply make an additional contribution towards meeting the need, we cannot say. In either case, the LPPD should support the delivery of such sites, in order to do all it can to ensure reasonable prospects of the five-year requirement being met and in light of the fact that the housing need figure should be taken as a minimum requirement.

Question 10

In overall terms would the Plan realistically deliver the number of dwellings required over the plan period?

38. The LPPD's housing trajectory projects a total of 14,872⁷ dwellings over the plan period.
39. Policy S4 of the LPPD suggests a requirement / target of 14,608 dwellings for the Plan period. The trajectory provides for a mere 264 dwellings more than the requirement / target – a buffer of just 1.8%. There is very little contingency to allow for sites not coming forward as currently anticipated, which is of particular concern given the strong trend of under delivery over the last decade.

⁷ The trajectory within the LPPD states the total is 14,871, but the annual figures sum to 14,872.

- 40. For the reasons set out in our response to Question 4, we consider that the large strategic sites will not deliver until later in the Plan period than proposed in LPPD housing trajectory.
- 41. Furthermore, it is improbable that all sites within the trajectory will all deliver as many dwellings as projected, all as quickly as projected.
- 42. Having regard to all of the above, we do not consider it to be at all realistic that the LPPD will deliver the number of homes required. To address this, the Council should allocate a number of small and medium sized sites that provide greater certainty of delivery and consequently provide a buffer above the minimum housing requirement.

Question 14

Is there sufficient variety in terms of the location and type of sites allocated?

- 43. No. The LPPD is highly reliant on a very limited number of large sites. This is clearly contrary to the NPPF, both in terms of the lack of flexibility it affords, and the lack of allocation of small and medium sized sites.
- 44. Many of the LPPD's defects discussed within our response to Matter 8 (lack of sufficient flexibility to respond to rapid change, limited prospects of current housing needs being met in the short-term, over reliance on large, strategic sites) could be remedied through the allocation of additional small and medium sized sites which would in turn support existing social and community infrastructure in the relevant settlements.