

Epping Forest District Council: Examination of the Local Plan, 2011-2033

Pre-Hearing Statement – Response to Inspectors Matters, Issues and Questions

MATTER 5: Site Selection Methodology and the Viability of Site Allocations

Issue 1: Have the Plan's housing allocations been chosen on the basis of a robust assessment process?

21st February 2019

1. Introduction

- 1.1 These representations have been prepared by Kember Loudon Williams on behalf of Croudace Strategic, the owner of Land at Stonards Hill, Epping. The land was previously referred to by the Council as being incorporated within the following land parcels: EPP-B, SR-046ii, DSR 049 & 049.1. This site is identified below in red (Figure 1) and is situated to the north east of the town.
- 1.2 Croudace Strategic has promoted the site for housing through the Local Plan process and have previously provided representations in respect of the site. The representations to date were also supported by technical reports on Landscape, Highways and Ecology that demonstrate the site's suitability for housing. Whilst this site did not proceed beyond Stage 3 of the Local Plan site selection process, which formed part of the ARUP Site Selection Report 2018, we remain of the view that this technical work remains material and importantly in this context supports the allocation of the site for housing.

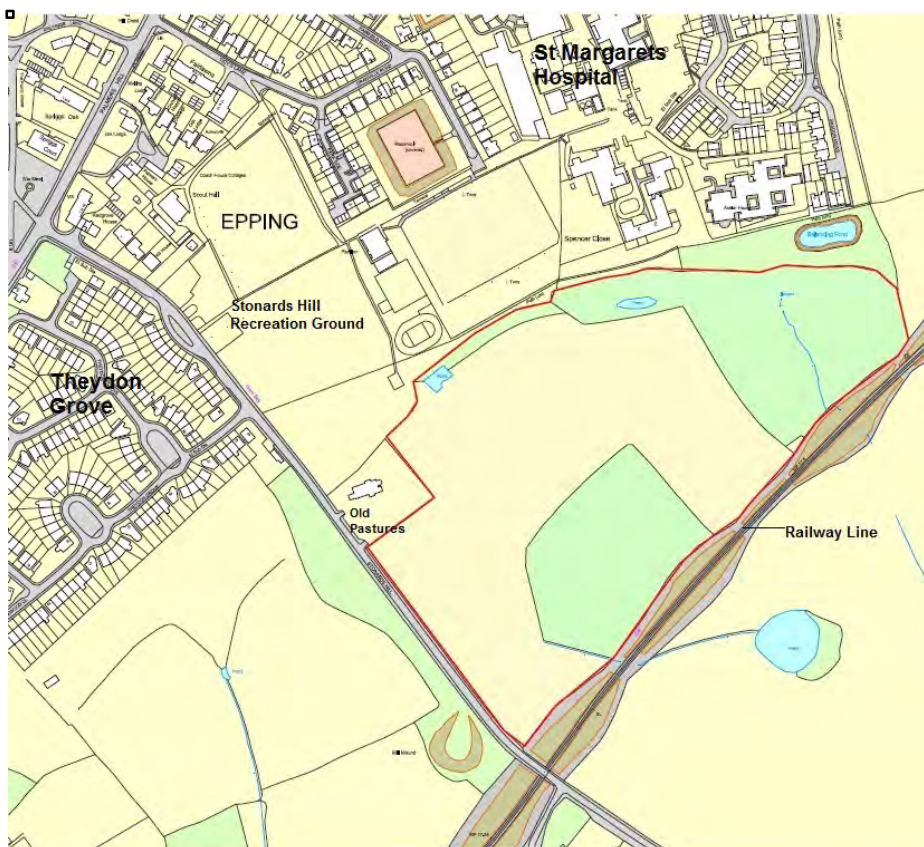


Figure 1: Land at Stonards Hill outlined in red.

- 1.3 These representations focus on the Inspector's Examination into Epping Forest District Council's (EFDC) Local Plan, and in particular **Matter 5, Issue 1** of the Inspector's "Matters Issues and Questions" (MIQs) document, dated November 2018. We will respond to the various questions surrounding Issue 1, below. In view of our client's interests, the responses are naturally focused on Epping and the Land at Stonards Hill site, included in Figure 1.



2. **QUESTION 1: The Council should provide a summary of the process by which the Plan's housing allocations were selected. In particular:**
- a) How was the initial pool of sites for assessment identified?
 - b) How was the Site Selection Methodology (SSM) utilised in the Site Selection Report 2018 (EB805) established and is it robust?
 - c) What is the relationship between the SSM and the sequential approach to site selection set out in Policy SP2 (A)?
 - d) What was the role of the Sustainability Appraisal in selecting between the various sites?
 - e) Was any other evidence taken into account in the site selection process? In particular how has the historic environment been taken into account? Have Historic Impact Assessments been undertaken as recommended by Historic England and if not, is this necessary?
- 2.1 Our response to this question focuses on parts b) and e) directly, which we will consider in turn.
- 2.2 We submit that the SSM is not robust, and its application as the method for site selection is flawed, for the reasons set out below. We will also identify and discuss the other evidence which has/has not informed the Site Selection process and the relevance of this evidence.
- 2.3 Whilst we support the broad aims and approach of the SSM prepared, its application in the assessment of Land at Stonards Hill site SR-0406ii, as part of the Arup Site Selection Report 2018 is inconsistent. The conclusions of Stage 3 of the Site Selection Report 2018 do not match the findings of the assessment undertaken in Stage 2. The conclusions made in the Site Selection Report for not progressing further with site SR-0406ii have been consistently incorrect, despite representations made and supporting material supplied.
- 2.4 Stage 2 of the site selection process focused on site suitability quantitative and qualitative assessment. Similar findings were identified for site SR-406ii in the both the 2016 and 2018 Site Selection Reports. As explained in the SSM, this assessment process is based on the 'Red-Amber-Green' (RAG) rating system, as explained in Appendix A of the SSM.
- 2.5 Under this system, there were only 3 'red' scores for the Land at Stonards Hill site (SR-0406ii), out of a total of 32 assessment criteria. The three red scores included: impact on agricultural land; landscape sensitivity; and topographical constraints. Focusing on the landscape and topographical concerns raised, repeated representations have been submitted which demonstrate why the scoring is incorrect, including the preparation of supporting material in the form of a Preliminary Landscape and Visual Assessment (PLVS) undertaken in 2013 by David Huskisson Associates.
- 2.6 The PLVS identifies that in EFDC's Settlement Edge Landscape Sensitivity Study 2010, site SR-0406ii is identified as lying on the Epping side of a 'Visually Significant Slope' which together with the railway line, and the treed boundary, visually contains the site in the wider landscape – these are positive attributes. The self-contained visual character of SR-0406ii is material and, in our view these important findings have been repeatedly overlooked, as have the conclusions of the PLVS submitted. On this basis, we consider the scoring for the 'landscape sensitivity' criterion for site SR-0406ii given in the Stage 2 "site selection" assessment should not have been included within the 'red' category.
- 2.7 The PLVS prepared is still material as there has been no change in landscape terms to this area. Furthermore, EFDC are still relying on their Landscape Character Assessment and Settlement Edge Landscape Sensitivity Study 2010, which predate our PLVS.



- 2.8 It is also considered that site SR-0406ii should not score 'red' in relation to topographical constraints due to the natural fall and enclosure of the site and the woodland screening that the site benefits from. To the east is the Local Wildlife Site, which is a thick block of Ash woodland. To the south is another block of woodland, and the full extent of the southern boundary is formed by the railway cutting and tree lined embankments. Stonards Hill lies to the west and is heavily treed. These features act as a strong landscape and visual screen.
- 2.9 The Site Selection process then continued to Stage 3, which provided justification of site suitability in Appendix B1.5.2 of the ARUP Site Selection Report 2018. In relation to Land at Stonards Hill, site SR-0406ii, this read as follows:
- "This site scored poorly against several criteria at Stage 2, including loss of TPO trees, landscape sensitivity and a BAP priority habitat. It was considered that the latter two constraints were unlikely to be overcome."*
- 2.10 The justification given above completely contradicts the Stage 2 assessment, which states in relation to "BAP Priority Species or Habitats" on site SR-0406ii, that impacts may be able to be mitigated. There has never been any reference to trees being removed, and previous queries regarding the loss of trees and woodland are unfounded as Croudace has always maintained trees and woodland will be protected.
- 2.11 As referred to in our previous Pre-Hearing Statement (Matter 4, Issue 4.2), the "Development Principles Plan" prepared for Land at Stonards Hill (Appendix A of this Statement), confirms the woodland areas of the site will be protected as part of any development on the site, with necessary ecological enhancements and improvements identified once detailed Ecological surveys have been undertaken. In addition, green routes through the site will provide recreation benefits and better accessibility. We maintain as above, that the concerns raised over landscape sensitivity were addressed in the submission of the PLVS. Clearly the identified concerns can readily be overcome and moreover, will contribute positively to the overall environmental benefits arising from developing the site.
- 2.12 Stage 3 of the Site Selection Process, as explained in the SSM, is to identify preferred sites to meet the Council's preferred growth strategy. Part of this process identifies the preferred strategic options for growth in each settlement. For Epping, six options were considered. Land at Stonards Hill (SR-0406ii) was included within the "north-eastern expansion" growth option for Epping, but regrettably, this appears to have been discounted for mainly landscape sensitivity reasons, similar to the individual site suitability assessment conclusions identified in paragraph 2.9, above.
- 2.13 We question EFDC's reasoning for the entire "north-east" Epping area being discounted for Landscape reasons, particularly with regards site SR-0406ii. The conclusions in our submitted PLVS (paragraph 6.6), referring to the Epping Forest District Council Landscape Character Assessment 2010 and the Settlement Edge Landscape Sensitivity Study 2012, state that:
- "both of these EFDC studies are relatively broad brush. It is possible that within the areas considered, discrete pockets with different characteristics may be found where, on more detailed examination, development may be acceptable."*
- 2.14 The PLVS concluded that the landscape quality of the site was fair and the value was medium. Moreover it advised that should the site be developed, that landscape and visual changes would be likely to be minor and only of localised significance.



- 2.15 It appears that in Stage 3 of the Site Selection process, as identified in Arup's Site Selection Report 2018 and SSM, that the precursor for taking forward preferred sites for further consideration, was that they needed to be within one of the "preferred strategic growth option areas". Site SR-0406ii was not in a suitable growth area to Epping, and perhaps the real reason behind being discounted?
- 2.16 Whilst understandable on one hand, this approach is too strategic and fails to take account of other localised and demonstrably sustainable sites, such as Land at Stonards Hill (SR-0406ii), that lie adjacent to the edge of the settlement with ready and easy access to local jobs, community facilities, shops, services etc. For example, site SR-0406ii is situated very close to St Margret's Hospital and EFDC's offices, both of which are major employers. There are also excellent links to public transport, leisure opportunities and to sport and recreational facilities including the adjacent recreation ground and playground. As we have mentioned, landscape concerns raised about the site can be overcome through appropriate design and mitigation. As such, we consider the SSM approach to focusing on a preferred growth option areas as misguided as it fails to take account of available, suitable and sustainable sites in less preferred strategic areas.
- 2.17 This generates further questions regarding the choice of "South Epping" as the most suitable strategic growth option. In our previous Pre-Hearing Statement re: Matter 4, Issue 4.2, we highlighted the concerns with the progression of the South Epping proposed masterplan area in Green Belt terms. The findings of the LUC Green Belt Review, Stage 2 (2016) concluded that the south of Epping sites that now form the masterplan area for Epping are not suitable in Green Belt terms, and if released would result in the highest level of harm to the Green Belt. It is unclear how therefore, the release of these southern sites from the Green Belt can be justified.
- 2.18 It was expected that the significant findings of the Stage 2 Green Belt Review 2016 should form part of the stated evidence which informed the site selection process as part of the Site Selection Report 2018. However, Part 3 of the SSM does not include this core evidence document as part of the relevant evidence which has informed the site selection process. This was notwithstanding the SSM being first drafted in April 2016, then updated and finalised in June 2017, predating both the dates of both the Stage 1 and 2 Green Belt Reviews (2015 & 2016).
- 2.19 As we have maintained, these inconsistencies cast considerable doubt on the suitability of south of Epping as a strategic growth option in Green Belt terms, particularly when there are less sensitive sites that are sustainable and deliverable in the Plan period. Stage 2 of the Green Belt Review 2016 deemed the release of the Land at Stonards Hill site (SR-0406ii) as being "less sensitive" than releasing the south Epping sites, and is worthy of further consideration.
- 2.20 On the basis of the above analysis and previous representations, it is essential now that the Inspector invites EFDC to explain precisely why its current "preferred strategic growth solution", which proposes to release Green Belt land to the south of the town, directly undermines the findings of its own Green Belt Review (LUC Stage 2 Green Belt Review 2016). This is wholly inconsistent and contrary to para 35 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) which states that for a Local Plan to be found sound it must be justified, based on "proportionate evidence".



3. **Question 2 – How were the conclusions reached about individual sites checked for accuracy and consistency?**

- 3.1 Paragraphs 2.4-2.15 above have referred to the inaccuracies and inconsistencies with the assessment of site SR-0406ii specifically. We look forward to the Inspector probing EFDC for a response to this question, specifically with regards Land at Stonards Hill, identified as site SR-0406ii.

- 3.2 We would take this opportunity to again look at the merits of Land at Stonards Hill as being suitable for development. In brief it is in a sustainable location for new development on the north east edge of the settlement; with excellent links to public transport and is within close walking distance to access the shops and local facilities of the town centre, including employment and healthcare services. All key facilities are within 800 to 1200 metres of the site. Landscape, Ecology and Highways Assessments have all been undertaken which support development of the site for housing. In addition, the Land at Stonards Hill is well defined and contained by the existing railway line to the east, which would ensure that its development would not set a precedent for future encroachment of development into the Green Belt, beyond the railway line.

- 3.3 It is maintained that all reservations raised by EFDC through the site selection process regarding Land at Stonards Hill (SR-0406ii), including landscape sensitivities, impact on Green Belt and setting of the historic environment can be overcome through appropriate design.

APPENDIX 1

DEVELOPMENT PRINCIPLES PLAN



LAND NORTH OF STONARDS HILL, EPPING, SITE EPPB

DEVELOPMENT PRINCIPLES PLAN



KEY:

- SITE BOUNDARY
- ESTABLISHED WOODLAND OF SEMI-MATURE AND MATURE TREES: ASH WOOD AND HIGH WOOD
- POOR QUALITY THORN, HEDGEROW AND TREES (SYCAMORE)
- TREE-LINED CUTTING / EMBANKMENT TO RAILWAY LINE
- ARABLE LAND
- PONDS
- BURIAL GROUND
- EPPING ONGAR RAILWAY LINE
- RESIDENTIAL PROPERTIES BACKING ONTO SITE
- LAND FALLING AWAY TO EAST AND SOUTH-EAST
- STRONG DEFENDABLE BOUNDARY TO COUNTRYSIDE
- HIGH VISIBILITY FRONTAGE
- CHILDREN'S PLAYGROUND - EXISTING
- STONARDS HILL RECREATION GROUND: LOCAL HUB. OPPORTUNITY TO LINK FACILITIES/ACCESS
- COMMUNITY / RECREATION BUILDINGS
- EASTERN GAS BOARD 12 METRE EXCLUSION ZONE
- TRANSCO 190m PIPELINE

- 1** PRINCIPAL VEHICULAR ACCESS FROM STONARDS HILL - CREATE STRONG PEDESTRIAN/VEHICULAR ROUTES TO 'ORGANISE' THE DEVELOPMENT.
- 2** RETAIN WOODLAND AREAS - IMPROVE AND INTEGRATE WITH GREEN ROUTES THROUGH THE NEW HOUSING.
- 3** IMPORTANT VISUAL AND PHYSICAL LINK BETWEEN STONARDS HILL RECREATION GROUND AND NEW HOUSING. CREATE A STRATEGIC GREEN CORRIDOR THROUGH THE SITE TO LINK THE WOODLAND AREAS WITH THE RECREATION GROUND.
- 4** FORM A CENTRAL 'GREEN FOCUS' FOR THE NEW HOUSING TO CREATE A SENSE OF ARRIVAL.
- 5** POSSIBLE AREAS FOR NEW HOMES - A MIX OF ACCOMMODATION WILL BE PROVIDED WITH AN EMPHASIS ON FAMILY HOMES.
- 6** RECREATION AND COMMUNITY FOCUS - PROMOTE LINKS WITH NEW AND EXISTING COMMUNITIES AND IMPROVE FACILITIES FOR WIDER BENEFIT.
- 7** PHYSICAL SEPARATION AND PROTECTIVE SCREEN TO PRESERVE THE AMENITIES OF 'OLD PASTURES'.
- 8** INTEGRATE MOVEMENT NETWORKS WITH EXISTING PUBLIC FOOTPATHS TO PROVIDE DIRECT ACCESS ON FOOT TO ST. MARGARET'S HOSPITAL, STONARDS HILL RECREATION GROUND AND THE TOWN CENTRE.
- 9** INTRODUCE NEW LANDMARK BUILDINGS TO CREATE FOCAL POINTS IN VIEWS INTO THE SITE AND ACROSS THE RECREATION GROUND.

