

Epping Forest Local Plan Examination

Matter 5 – Site Selection Methodology and the Viability of Site Allocations

Examination Statement by Nexus Planning on behalf of St Congar Provincial

1. These statements have been prepared by Nexus Planning on behalf of St Congar Provincial.
2. St Congar Provincial control an omission site known as land at Old Farm, Chigwell (the site), which has been promoted for housing. Our response to relevant matters, issues and questions are set out below.

Site Selection

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

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?

3. It will be for the Council to explain how the SSM was established, although in our opinion it is not robust.
4. As detailed within our Regulation 19 representations, we are pleased to see that the Council's Site Selection Report (EB805) concludes that land controlled by St Congar Provincial (parcel is 16_Site_02-N-C) is *"identified as available within the first five years of the Plan period, with no identified constraints or restrictions that would prevent it coming forward for development"*. This is of particular note given the recent discussions surrounding the Council's five year housing land supply during Matter 3, which will no doubt continue in Matter 6.
5. Notwithstanding the above, we consider that the Council's flawed SSM has subsequently led it to discount this site (and likely many others). OAN is not being met as a consequence and the plan is not therefore positively prepared.
6. Our principal concern with the SSM surrounds the limited role the Council's defined settlement hierarchy appears to have played in determining site allocations, noting that one of the core planning principles identified at paragraph 17 of the NPPF is to *"actively manage patterns of growth to make the fullest use of public transport, walking and cycling, and focus significant development in locations which are or can be made sustainable"* and that the outcome of the Community Choices Consultation 2012 showed support for a dispersed pattern of growth (see paragraph 6.33 of EB204). Similar concerns were also raised in our Matter 4 Statements.
7. Paragraph 4.27 of the SSM (EB805AK) validates our concerns, outlining that:

“The settlement hierarchy will only be used as a sense check on the results given that the land available does not tally with the places most likely to provide growth in line with the existing hierarchy.”

8. It is fully accepted that suitable and available sites may not have been presented to provide sufficient growth in higher order settlements to meet OAN, or that particular areas may become a focus for growth for economic reasons. However, the SSM should still nevertheless have due regard to the relative position of settlements within the hierarchy and accordingly place a positive weighting on sites in more sustainable locations from the outset, before considering site specific constraints, in order to ensure that growth is directed to the most sustainable locations, in accordance with national policy.
9. In adopting the Council’s SSM, we consider that sites that are otherwise suitable and available for development are being discounted.
10. To further illustrate this point, the Council’s Settlement Hierarchy Technical Paper 2015 (EB1007) identifies that Chigwell scores at the highest end of the ‘Large Village’ category and only one point away from a Town designation, but nevertheless is only allocated limited growth, which would result in the long term decline of the settlement (see our Matter 4 Statements). This is despite the Council accepting that land controlled by St Congar Provincial on the edge of Chigwell (parcel 16_Site_02-N-C in the Site Selection Report) is suitable and available for development, and only discounting it as other sites *“cumulatively provide the desired growth in this settlement”* (see Appendix B1.1 of the Site Selection Report).
11. Focusing further growth at higher order settlements, such as Chigwell, would ensure housing is provided in locations easily commutable to London, a critical spatial strategy issues that the Council has overlooked given the out-commuting patterns of the District (see our Matter 4 Statement for further details).
12. For the reasons set out above, the SSM is not justified or consistent with national policy and accordingly unsound, contrary to paragraph 182 of the NPPF.

[c. What is the relationship between the SSM and the sequential approach to site selection set out in Policy SP2\(A\)?](#)

13. Paragraph 2.17 of the Council’s Site Selection Report (EB805) sets out the Council’s approach to allocating sites as part of Stage 6 of the EB805. This is further explained in Appendix A of the report (EB805AK) where the report identifies at Stage 6.1B and 6.3 that sites were sifted against the Local Plan Strategy. Although not wholly clear, it is assumed that this means the SSM took account of the sequential site selection approach outlined at Policy SP2(A).

14. It is important the Council confirm this to be the case, and evidence it, as otherwise the allocations would conflict with the sequential approach outlined at Policy SP2(A). Furthermore, the sequential approach would serve no purpose and should be deleted.

d. What was the role of the Sustainability Appraisal in selecting between the various sites?

15. The Council's Sustainability Appraisal (SA) (EB204) at Appendix V outlines the strategic options identified for each settlement (see paragraph 7.26 of the SA for reference). However, it is important to note that the SA does not consider the merits of individual sites. For example in respect of Chigwell, five strategic growth options are considered such as 'intensification' and 'north-east expansion'. In the vast majority of cases the strategic growth options are significant in scale, often including multiple developer promotions. It is therefore clear that the SA only offers high level conclusions and does not assess reasonable alternatives at a site level. This is a significant limitation of the SA. We note that the selection of specific sites is undertaken within the Site Selection Report (EB805).

16. Notwithstanding the above, the conclusions of the SA do appear to feed in to the EFDLP itself, where paragraph 5.103 (which comprises supporting text to Policy P 7) identifies three appropriate spatial options for Chigwell (and Chigwell Row), one of which includes 'expansion of the settlement to the north east'. Referring back to the SA, it is clear that 'north-eastern expansion' covers parcel 035.8 of the Green Belt Assessment Phase 2 (EB705A), albeit no land within this parcel is actually allocated within the EFDLP. The role of the SA in allocating sites is therefore somewhat unclear.

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. How were the conclusions reached about individual sites checked for accuracy and consistency?

Were sites visited or were they assessed through a desktop process? What has been done to check the assessments in specific cases where their accuracy has been challenged e.g. Site SR-0596? (Reps 19LAD0012).

3. As raised in Matter 1, Issue 2, some sites which were proposed for allocation in the Regulation 18 version of the Plan are not proposed in the Regulation 19/submitted version and vice versa. Is this due to changes in the site selection process, or something else? Are the different conclusions reached about the relevant sites fully explained and justified?

4. Having regard to Question 1c above, is the sequential approach to site allocation set out in Policy SP2(A) justified, particularly in respect of the value placed upon open spaces within settlements? How was the adequacy of remaining open space within a settlement measured (Policy SP2(A)(iv))?

17. No, the sequential approach is not justified.

18. As detailed within our Regulation 19 representations to Policy SP2, we have significant concerns with the sequential approach advocated Policy SP2(A), notably criterion 'iv' associated with the allocation of sites on existing open space within settlement.

19. Appendix 2 of the Open Space Strategy (EB703) sets out a quantitative analysis of open space provision on a settlement by settlement basis and across the District as a whole. This identifies that significant shortfalls in Amenity Greenspace, Public Parks and Gardens, and Play Space currently exist across the District (and many settlements). Furthermore, this will worsen over the plan period.

20. When looking at specific settlements, such as Chigwell (where allocations on open space are proposed), the Open Space Strategy is clear that it suffers from existing shortfalls in open space provision across all areas other than Natural and Semi-Natural Greenspace, a situation which will worsen further over the plan period.

21. Paragraph 9.72 of the SA notes that there have been concerns raised in relation to the loss of some amenity open space within Loughton and Chigwell, but states that:

"...policy requirements include provision of open space throughout the settlements, to offset any potential loss. Additionally, existing green space provision within the settlements is good, and there is sufficient access to the wider green infrastructure network. On balance, it is appropriate to conclude that the Submission Plan would have significant positive long term effects on communities and wellbeing."

22. Having regard to the conclusions of the Open Space Strategy outlined above, it is demonstrable that based upon the Council's own evidence this is not the case, particularly in respect of Chigwell.

23. It is therefore concluded that the relative priority the Council has given to developing existing open space within settlements is wholly unjustified and there is no evidence to demonstrate that such allocations can maintain adequate open space provision within the relevant settlements - indeed the Council's evidence suggests the contrary.

24. As a result, the Council's approach is unjustified and contrary to national policy. To address this issue of soundness, we consider that the Council should omit existing allocations on existing open space and allocate sites on the edge of sustainable settlements where scope exists to provide new open space, to help overcome existing shortfalls, delivering significant social and environmental benefits.

5. Now that the site selection process is complete for the purpose of making allocations in the Plan, is it necessary to include the sequential approach within Policy SP2(A)?

Matter 5 Examination Statement continued

6. Is it justified to allocate station car parks (EPP.R3; LOU.R1, LOU.R2; BUCK.R2; THYB.R2) and other car parks (EPP.R6, EPP.R7) for housing? Can adequate parking for both commuters and residents be provided; and how will short-term disruption to commuter parking during the construction phase be addressed?