



Planning Inspectorate

Castle Point Plan

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INITIAL EXAMINATION GUIDANCE NOTE

1. This note provides guidance to participants on the procedural and administrative arrangements for the initial hearing sessions as part of the examination of the Castle Point Plan 2026-2043 (the Plan). Examination documents are in the examination library on the examination website: [Castle Point Plan](#)

Dates of the initial hearing sessions

2. In our [Initial Note](#) dated 26 March 2026, we said that from our initial considerations we have significant concerns about the soundness of the Plan in respect of housing requirement and supply and that we would like to explore these soundness concerns at initial focussed hearing sessions.
3. We will hold the initial hearing sessions in person at the offices of Castle Point Borough Council, Kiln Road, Thundersley, Benfleet SS7 1TF. They will take place on Tuesday 7, Wednesday 8 and Thursday 9 September 2026. Participants should also keep Friday 10 September free as a reserve day.
4. We have prepared a document setting out our Initial Matters, Issues and Questions (MIQs).
5. We have also prepared a note setting out some technical questions which we would like the Council to answer.
6. Annette Feeney is the Programme Officer and is responsible for the administration of the examination. She is working under our direction, is impartial and is independent of the Council. The role of the Programme Officer is to provide an effective channel of communication between all parties and ourselves, liaise with parties to ensure the smooth running of the examination, to ensure that all examination documents received are appropriately managed and added to the examination library on the examination webpages and to act as the main point of contact for all procedural and administrative matters.

7. Please address all programming queries, practical and procedural points to the Programme Officer. This includes any access or special requirements related to attendance.
8. All examination documents are on the examination website. If you do not have access to the internet, please contact the Programme Officer about alternative arrangements for viewing the documents. There is publicly accessible unsecured WiFi in the hearing venue.

Purpose of the initial hearing sessions and Inspectors' role

9. The purpose of the initial hearing sessions is to focus on our soundness concerns in relation to housing requirement and supply. This is to enable us to obtain the information we need on this Matter before we consider next steps. Following the close of the initial hearing sessions, we will write to the Council setting out how the examination is to continue. Should the examination proceed, we will issue a further guidance note at that stage relating to further hearing sessions.

Inspectors' role

10. Our role is to conduct an independent examination of the soundness and legal compliance of the Plan and to produce a report and recommendations to the Council.
11. The National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) states that, to be sound, a local plan must be:
 - **positively prepared** – providing a strategy which, as a minimum, seeks to meet the area's objectively assessed needs; and is informed by agreements with other authorities, so that unmet need from neighbouring areas is accommodated where it is practical to do so and is consistent with achieving sustainable development;
 - **justified** – an appropriate strategy, taking into account the reasonable alternatives, and based on proportionate evidence;
 - **effective** – deliverable over the plan period, and based on effective joint working on cross-boundary strategic matter that have been dealt with rather than deferred, as evidenced by the statement of common ground; and
 - **consistent with national policy** – enabling the delivery of sustainable development in accordance with the policies in the Framework and other statements of national planning policy, where relevant.
12. It is not part of our role to make improvements to the Plan, provided it is sound and legally compliant.
13. There are three possible outcomes to the examination:
 - the submitted Plan is sound;
 - the submitted Plan is not sound but could be made sound by making changes (main modifications 'MMs'), if necessary following additional work; or,

- the submitted Plan is not sound and could not be made sound by any changes.
14. The Council has formally requested that we recommend any main modifications necessary to make the Plan sound.

Site allocations and omission sites

15. Our starting point for the examination is that the Council has submitted a plan which it considers is sound and legally compliant. We will therefore be considering whether the policies and site allocations within the Plan comply with the requirements. At these initial hearing sessions however, we will not be examining whether any of the site allocations in the Plan are sound. We do not wish to hear evidence at this stage about those allocations. If the examination proceeds to the next stage, then at that point we will invite further representations to be made and participation where eligible in subsequent hearing sessions.
16. We will not be considering the merits of any alternative or omission sites, unless we specifically ask about them by way of example.
17. Those seeking changes need to demonstrate why the submitted Plan is not sound, rather than highlight an alternative or omission site.

Conduct of the initial hearing sessions

18. Apart from the opening session on 7 September which will begin at 10:00, the hearing sessions will normally run between 9:30 (Wednesday and Thursday) and 11:00, 11:30 and 13:00 and between 14:00 and 15:30 and 16:00 and 17:00, unless otherwise stated.
19. The hearing sessions will be in the form of structured round table discussions which we will lead. The MIQs will form the agenda for a given day but we may supplement that with additional detail for some sessions.
20. There will be no formal presentation of evidence and no cross-examination. Barristers and solicitors, if present, will be treated as part of the respective organisation or team. We will generally make some brief introductory comments and then invite individuals to respond to specific questions. In most cases we will start with asking the Council questions and then extend the discussion. We will have read all the relevant representations and statements beforehand. The hearings are not an opportunity to repeat a case already set out in written representations.
21. The discussion will focus on the issues in the programme and agendas with any additional points or supplementary questions we wish to ask arising from any further written statements.
22. The Council will need to keep a list of actions arising from each day and liaise with the Programme Officer to ensure that it is accurate. The Inspectors will seek updates or clarification on these lists at the start of, or end of hearing sessions.
23. Participants should make themselves familiar with the Planning Inspectorate Customer Charter, the link to which is at the end of this guidance note. We will not

tolerate any abusive language or behaviour directed at us or the Programme Officer, or any abusive references made in hearing statements.

Representations on the Plan

24. Only those who have made representations within the prescribed time periods and seek changes to the Plan have a right to be invited to and participate in, relevant hearing sessions. However, anyone is free to observe any session.
25. If you wish to participate at the initial hearings, and you have made relevant representations, please contact the Programme Officer as soon as possible and by **30 June 2026** at the latest to confirm this. You must do this regardless of what you may have indicated in your original representation(s). Please clarify which issues are relevant to your representations, and on which questions you wish to speak. Please note that if you do not contact the Programme Officer by that date, we will assume you do not wish to appear, and you will not be listed as a participant.
26. If you wish to observe the initial hearing sessions, please notify the Programme Officer by 30 June 2026. The Council intends to live-stream the hearing sessions. Further information about this will be added to the examination website before the start of the sessions.
27. Where several people or organisations wish to speak on the same issue and/or wish to make the same point, you should consider appointing a single spokesperson or persons. We will not allow repetition of points, to make effective use of available time in the hearing sessions. The Programme Officer will assist you with such arrangements.
28. A final programme will be published on the examination website around two weeks before the start of the initial hearing sessions. It will be for individual participants to check progress on this, either on the website or with the Programme Officer, to ensure that you attend the right sessions and at the right time. If anybody is unsure about which session their representations relate to, please contact the Programme Officer.
29. We will give equal regard to views put at the hearing sessions and those in writing. Participating in a hearing session will only be useful and helpful to us if you can engage in a debate and focus on our MIQs.
30. Aside from representations adhering to the advice below we are likely to return unsolicited correspondence unread. The examination of any local plan is lengthy and complex. We will consider all relevant views and evidence at the appropriate opportunity, but we cannot respond individually to unsolicited correspondence in most instances.
31. We would encourage representors to attempt to reach agreement with the Council on factual matters and evidence before hearings start. We would also encourage dialogue between representors and the Council in advance of the hearings. Statements of common ground to clarify areas of dispute and areas of commonality are especially welcome.

Further written statements

32. Our list of initial MIQs will form the basis for discussion at the initial hearing sessions. As participants should already have set out their full cases within their existing representations, there should ordinarily be no need to produce further written statements in response to the MIQs. Representators may therefore choose to rely upon their original response.
33. However, if participants do wish to produce further written hearing statements, these should *only* address the issues and questions set out in the initial MIQs, if these relate to points raised in your original representation. We shall not have regard to statements about matters or issues other than those set out in our initial MIQs. This is critically important for participants to understand. Previous representations will be taken into account, so statements should cross-refer to these rather than repeat them.
34. Should the examination proceed beyond these initial hearing sessions, further MIQs will be issued to cover other aspects of the Plan that we wish to examine and there will be an opportunity to submit further statements at that stage.
35. The examination documents are available on the website so participants should not attach extracts to statements. However, where statements refer to examination documents, it would be helpful to state the relevant document and page numbers.
36. To assist the conduct of the initial hearing sessions, any additional statements produced by participants must accord with the following:
 - Only respond to the specific questions in the initial MIQs which are relevant to the original representation.
 - Indicate clearly and succinctly exactly what changes are necessary, in your view, to make the Plan sound or legally compliant and make very clear the precise wording changes proposed.
 - Keep the statements focussed, to the point and no longer than 3000 words for the main issue. It is the quality of the reasoning which carries weight, not the length of the documents. Include the word count at the end of each statement.
 - Do not include appendices.
 - Submit two A4 sized paper copies along with the electronic version to the Programme Officer. Paper copies should be stapled and not bound with any A3 tables or diagrams folded to A4 size.
 - Paper copies should be sent to:
The Programme Officer, C/O Castle Point Plan, Planning Policy, Castle Point Borough Council, Kiln Road, Thundersley, Benfleet, SS7 1TF
37. Should participants use artificial intelligence in the production of hearing statements, they should make clear they have done this and provide details of the systems they have used, and the source(s) of the information relied upon.
38. Statements that are of excessive length or contain irrelevant or repetitious material may be returned.

39. Unlike other participants, the Council is not bound by the 3000-word limit. However, statements must be succinct and can include references to documents in the examination library.
40. All statements must be emailed to the Programme Officer by **5pm on Friday 24 July 2026**. This is an absolute deadline. Paper copies must be despatched to the Programme Officer that day. The address for paper copies to be sent to is:
- The Programme Officer, C/O Castle Point Plan, Planning Policy, Castle Point Borough Council, Kiln Road, Thundersley, Benfleet, SS7 1TF
41. The Programme Officer will ensure statements are on the examination website as soon as possible after the deadline for their receipt.

Site visits

42. If we determine it to be necessary for our consideration of the soundness of the Plan, we may visit relevant sites and areas before, during or after the initial hearing sessions. We will do this unaccompanied by any parties to the examination unless access to private land is necessary.

Close of the examination

43. Following the initial hearing sessions, the examination will remain open until we write to the Council setting out how the examination is to continue. We will not accept any further representations or evidence from any party during this time unless we have specifically requested it.
44. You can find further information about the preparation and examination of local plans using the following links:
- [National Planning Policy Framework December 2024](#)
 - [National Planning Practice Guidance on Plan-making](#)
 - Planning Inspectorate [Procedure Guide for Local Plan Examinations](#) (updated June 2026)
 - [Planning Inspectorate Customer Charter](#)

Mike Worden and Catherine Carpenter

INSPECTORS