

## **Castle Point Borough Council**

### **Local Plan Advisory Visit**

**27 February 2025**

Attendees:

Christa Masters	Planning Inspector
Matthew Amner	Planning Policy Officer
Stephen Garner	Assistant Director, Development Services
Beth Jones	Planning Policy Manager
Angela Law	Assistant Director, Legal and Democratic Services
Genny Middlemast	Senior Planning Policy Officer
Amanda Parrott	Assistant Director of Climate and Growth

#### **Introduction and Main Issues**

This was the second Advisory Visit for the Council, the first one taking place in July 2024.

I explained that the main purpose of the meeting was to discuss the matters which the Council had identified on the agenda. I outlined that I had read the briefing note and associated documents provided in advance. In summary, the main issues which were identified in advance of the meeting and subsequently discussed were:

- The Plan Strategy & the Plan Period
- Housing need and the Housing Requirement
- Duty to Cooperate & unmet need
- Housing Land Supply over the Plan Period and five year housing land supply
- Exceptional circumstances to justify any proposed changes to Green Belt Boundaries, Is the evidence base complete and up to date / approach to the Green Belt review
- The examination procedure & practical arrangements

The Council published an updated LDS in January 2025. This documents states that the Council would report to a Council meeting on the 26 March 2025 seeking approval for the Regulation 19 consultation to commence. The consultation period would run from April to May 2025 with the plan being submitted for examination in June 2025.

As a general matter, I highlighted that the Council do not appear to have undertaken any form of settlement hierarchy evidence. This is an important part of the evidence base given the emphasis placed on promoting sustainable patterns of development as set out within the Framework at paragraph 148. I also noted that the retail study was of limited value, with the survey work having been completed some 9 years ago. This means that there is no uptodate assessment of the role and function of the centres within the borough since the pandemic or

Brexit. I shall return to the relevance of these two pieces of the evidence base later within this note.

### **The Plan Strategy & the Plan Period**

The Council have identified their plan period to run from 2023 to 2043. As the plan would be covering strategic matters, it would need to ensure it is consistent with paragraph 22 of the Framework (plans should look ahead for a *minimum* 15 year period from adoption).

### **Housing Need and the Housing Requirement**

Since the last advisory meeting, the Government have published an updated National Planning Policy Framework. The Council acknowledge that this change means that the Council would no longer be pursuing the exceptional circumstances arguments put forward at the previous advisory visit to justify a different approach to assessing housing need. On this basis, the Council acknowledge that the standard method approach to the assessment of housing need indicates that the housing need for Castle Point would be a figure of 14,020 homes to 2043 (701dpa). The housing requirement proposed will not reflect this figure. It will be for the Council to provide robust justification for the figure proposed in line with paragraph 11 (b) of the Framework.

### **Duty to Cooperate & Unmet Need**

We discussed the steps the Council had taken in terms of maximising the effectiveness of the preparation of the Plan and the cooperation and joint working which has taken place since the previous plan was withdrawn in July 2022.

I highlighted that this was an area that the appointed Inspector would be likely to look at closely, and the Council should ensure that the supporting evidence base explains clearly the steps which have been taken as outlined within the Planning Practice Guidance and paragraphs 24-27 of the Framework. Whilst the DtC concerned all strategic matters, the Council should be explicit concerning consultation undertaken and responses in relation to addressing their unmet need and the housing requirement.

The Council are yet to quantify what level of housing need the Plan will accommodate. Without quantifying this, I advised it would be difficult to explain what effective engagement on the strategic matter of unmet housing need has taken place. I reinforced to the Council the importance of taking these steps and reiterated that this is not a matter that can be rectified once the Plan is submitted.

Whilst the Council highlighted that regular meetings take place with the South Essex Council Strategic Partnership, it would be for the Council to explain clearly what strategic matters have been addressed as part of these meetings, the outcomes and actions arising from these meetings, as well as the identification of any areas of disagreement and what attempts have been made to resolve them. Minutes of these meetings to support any statements of common ground are likely to be requested. It will also be necessary to set out how this engagement has influenced the development of the evidence base and the plan. We touched on other strategic matters which the DtC statement would be likely to address outside of housing including

infrastructure, gypsy and traveller needs, employment issues, the riverside strategy as well as biodiversity issues.

We discussed the importance of statements of common ground in this context in relation to strategic matters. I also emphasised that the Council should be pro active in this regard and not underestimate the time requirements for the documents to be drafted, commented on and agreed.

### **Housing Land Supply over the Plan Period and five year housing land supply**

The Council are yet to produce a housing trajectory, however they consider they will be identifying a stepped trajectory. They have also not set out their 5 year supply position for the purposes of the Regulation 19 Plan. They advised their current 5 year supply for decision making purposes was around 0.4 years. Given the stage of the plan preparation, this naturally limited the discussions which could take place in this regard however I emphasised the importance of being clear about which site allocations were dependant upon necessary infrastructure requirements, which should be set out clearly and evidenced accordingly within the IDP. I highlighted to the Council that the trajectory should be based on clear, robust and justified evidence regarding expected rates of delivery in relation to the sites proposed. The Council are aware of this requirement and are in the process of updating this information.

We discussed the importance of achieving appropriate densities as set out within paragraph 129 and 130 of the Framework. The borough on the whole is relatively low rise with existing dwellings set in spacious plots. The expectation is that the density standards identified within the Plan should seek a *significant uplift* (my emphasis) in the average density of residential development within these areas, unless it can be shown that there are strong reasons why this would not be appropriate. Policy SP2 as drafted identifies supporting a 'design led approach to optimise site densities on developable land', however it is not clear what the evidence base concludes in terms of what this significant uplift would achieve. The Council advised that they had completed some urban grain analysis however agreed to reconsider this point. The viability work also needs to reflect the conclusions drawn in this regard.

### **Exceptional circumstances to justify any proposed changes to Green Belt Boundaries, Is the evidence base complete and up to date / approach to the Green Belt review**

We discussed the relevance of paragraph 146 of the Framework which acknowledges that exceptional circumstances in the context of Green Belt boundaries now includes instances where an authority cannot meet its identified need for homes, commercial or other development. The Council have consultants undertaking a Green Belt Review, and I was provided with a summary of the methodology used for this as presented to Members as well as some preliminary work regarding grey belt and previously developed land. As a result of this work, a number of policies and potential site allocations remain unresolved awaiting the outcome of this evidence. It is likely that sites coming forward will comprise sites which the previous Inspector found sound in relation to the withdrawn Plan.

In order to undertake this work in a comprehensive manner, the Council need to understand the role and function of settlements within the borough, as referenced above and as set out at paragraph 148 of the Framework. The Council also need to be clear as to how their existing centres are functioning. The Council need to be able to determine the sustainability of a location and these are relevant factors to take into account. The evidence base is lacking in this regard.

I should also highlight that the Planning Practice Guidance in relation to Assessing Green Belt to identify grey belt land was published during the meeting. As a post meeting note, the Council should read this guidance carefully and ensure that the methodology used to date aligns with this guidance. This is particularly relevant to the evaluation of the contribution each assessment area makes to Green Belt purposes (a), (b) and (d), the clarification regarding the definition of large built up areas in terms of purpose A ( towns not villages) , as well as the specific guidance regarding identifying sustainable locations ( paragraph 011) which should be determined in light of local context and site or development considerations.

We discussed the importance of small sites, and the need for the Council to revisit Green Belt sites which have been previously discounted as part of this process as they could not provide over 100 units. Consideration will also need to be given to the interface of this Green Belt work with neighbouring authorities Green Belt boundaries.

### **The examination procedure & practical arrangements**

The Council were going to reflect on the discussion and feedback provided during the meeting. I requested that they keep the office uptodate regarding programme and timetabling.

In relation to the presentation of representations, I explained that the appointed Inspector would want to be able to easily search the database by policy or representor. I also advised that it was common practice that this would be accompanied by the Council's own assessment of the individual representations and whether any subsequent modifications maybe necessary to address any soundness issues. This approach could assist the Inspector in terms of framing the matters, issues and questions.

### **Conclusion**

The advisory visit and this note have been based on an initial and light touch assessment of documents provided by the Council and with a particular focus on the questions raised by the LPA. It is not binding on the Inspector who will subsequently be appointed to carry out the independent examination and who will take into account the evidence base and representations made at the Regulation 19 consultation stage.

In summary, the key points above raise significant questions regarding the timetable identified within the LDS. I reiterated these concerns to the Council. Namely, whether the Plan has been prepared in a positive and transparent manner, and whether work under the Duty to Cooperate has been effective given the substantial housing shortfall late in the plan preparation process. Given the extent of the concerns raised, the Council will need to consider carefully whether it is a good use of public time and expense to submit the Plan in its current form.

**C Masters**

**3 March 2025**