



Reigate & Banstead
BOROUGH COUNCIL
Banstead | Horley | Redhill | Reigate

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| REPORT OF: | HEAD OF POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND PROPERTY |
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| TO: | COUNCIL |
| DATE: | 11 APRIL 2013 |

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| AGENDA ITEM NO: | 6 | WARD(S) AFFECTED: | ALL WARDS |
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| SUBJECT: | PETITION: GREEN BELT DEVELOPMENT |
| PURPOSE OF THE REPORT: | TO RECEIVE A PETITION IN LINE WITH THE COUNCIL'S PETITION SCHEME |

RECOMMENDATION:

Council notes the petition and refers it to the Core Strategy Planning Inspector to take into account as part of the Examination in Public of the submitted Core Strategy proposals.

SUMMARY

Under the Council's Petition Scheme, any petition with more than 400 signatures is referred to Council for debate.

The Council has received a petition of 1258 signatures (including an e-petition of 1075 and a paper petition of 183 signatures) relating to Green Belt development. The Petition asks that the Council "halt plans for development on green belt land within the borough". The full details are set out in paragraph 6.

In relation to the petition and the required debate, this report also sets out the current position on the Core Strategy and the further amendments to it, in response to which the petition was submitted, and a number of related issues.

Options open to the Council in considering this petition are to:

1. Note the petition and refer it to the Core Strategy Planning Inspector to take into account as part of the Examination in Public on the submitted Core Strategy proposals (Recommended Option);
2. Support the request of the petitioners;
3. Reject the request of the petitioners; or
4. Refer the petition to the Executive for further consideration.

As the Core Strategy is already in examination, and the hearings are due to commence on 14 May 2013, the first option is recommended to ensure that the petition is given full consideration in the appropriate forum.

STATUTORY POWERS

1. The Council approved a Petition Scheme on 24th June 2010, in accordance with the *Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009*. The scheme sets out how the Council will respond to petitions.
2. The Localism Act 2011 revoked requirements placed on Councils in relation to petitions but the Council still retains its Petition Scheme. Council Procedure Rule 11 requires that the Council adhere to its Petition Scheme.

PETITION SCHEME

3. The scheme sets out the type of response the Council will provide, based on the number of signatories to the petition.
4. The table below summarises the Council's approach:

| Number of signatories | Response |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| less than 20 | Response from Officer (treated as standard correspondence). |
| 20 - 199 | Response from relevant Member of the Executive. |
| At least 200 | Referred to the Executive. |
| At least 200 | Officer(s) called to provide evidence at a meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, where such action is requested in the petition. |
| At least 400 | Debated at a meeting of the full Council. |

PETITION

5. An e-petition regarding the principle of Green Belt development was received on 31 January 2013. In addition the petition organiser canvassed signatures for a 'paper' version of the same petition. The e-petition closed on 31 March 2013 with 1075 signatures and the 'paper' petition contained 183 signatures. It has therefore been referred to Council for debate.

6. The terms of the petition are as follows:

"That the Council halt plans for development on green belt land within the borough and

In accordance with the motion passed by around 100 people at the public meeting in Redhill on Jan 21st: We the undersigned are 'implacably opposed to any development on the green belt within the borough of Reigate and Banstead', due to concerns including, but not limited to:

- *the loss of green spaces and public access;*
- *the likely increase in traffic and greater stress on existing infrastructure;*
- *the lack of ambition in identifying brownfield land sites for redevelopment as housing, e.g. unused offices;*

- *the fact that the borough have been working to a target of 460 new houses per year, compared to a Surrey average of 240;*
- *the likelihood of new projects serving city commuters rather than providing affordable housing for the local community;*
- *the prospect of unchecked urban sprawl.*

Current proposals would allow for the construction of 1,400 houses on sites around Redhill and Reigate and another 200 around Horley. Further information: <http://rbgp.org.uk/2013/01/save-the-green-belt/> (including map and links to public consultation ending Feb 4th) <http://www.facebook.com/SaveReigatesGreenBelt.>"

7. A complete copy of the petition and the signatories has been placed in the Members Room. In line with the petition scheme, details of the petition have been published on the Council's website.

CURRENT POSITION AND ISSUES

8. The petition has been prompted by the recent public consultation on the Further Amendments to Core Strategy. These identified 'broad areas of search' for sustainable urban extensions in the Green Belt in the event that all other sources of housing land supply run out. Whilst the Core Strategy previously included the principle of urban extensions, in response to the Inspector's concerns the Council's Further Amendments were more specific about where those might be located.

The Core Strategy

9. The Council has a statutory duty to prepare a local plan and the Council's local plan is required to be prepared in accordance with national guidance. Until last month, it was also required to be prepared in accordance with the South East Plan, which has now been revoked.
10. The Core Strategy is the part of the local plan that sets out the long-term framework to guide development in the Borough for the next 15 years, to 2027. It includes information about where development will go and strategic policies to protect and improve our towns, villages and countryside. The Core Strategy itself does not allocate any sites for development. It will be followed by more detailed policy and site allocations to be set out in the Development Management Policy Development Plan Document.
11. The Core Strategy was submitted by the Council to the Secretary of State for independent examination in May 2012 following a full Council resolution in April 2012.

The local housing target

12. The submitted Core Strategy sets out a local housing target of 460 new homes each year over the next 15 years. The South East Plan, now revoked, set a housing allocation for the Borough of 500 new homes each year between 2006 and 2026. The housing target the Council has agreed is a balance between the need and demand for new homes and the aim to protect the highly-valued environmental quality of the Borough.

13. Government guidance set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (March 2012) requires the Council to plan to meet its 'objectively assessed housing need'. The Council needs to ensure that sufficient housing land is available to provide homes for local people and local workers. More homes will be required for the growing population of local people and for their children, to account for in-migration from London and elsewhere, and also to take account of household changes such as the ageing population and smaller families.
14. Each Council must set its own local housing target that balances the needs, demands and constraints of its own district or borough which explains why there is a variation between the housing targets of the districts and boroughs in Surrey, which differ widely in terms of size, population, and in their urban and rural nature.
15. Having a local housing target and a clear strategy for delivering new housing will allow the Council to plan properly for future growth. It will ensure that development happens where it is easiest to manage its impacts. New development can also help pay for improvements to local services, such as roads and schools. It is important that the infrastructure needed to support new housing is delivered in a timely manner, as set out in the Infrastructure Delivery Plan that underpins the Core Strategy.
16. The submitted Core Strategy set out the principle that in the longer term, housing development on greenfield sites may be needed.

The strategy for new housing development

17. The Council has investigated different options for where housing development will go in the future. The priority will be to locate new development in the identified regeneration and growth areas (Horley NE and NW sectors and town centre, Redhill, Preston and Merstham), and then existing towns and villages, to make best use of 'previously developed' or 'brownfield' land and existing services. However, there is a limit to how much housing can be fitted into our towns and villages without affecting the character of these places and the quality of life of people who already live there.
18. Whilst the Council must allocate in the local plan sufficient sites to meet the housing target, much of the development in towns and villages comes forward as 'windfall' development rather than through allocated sites. 'Windfall' sites are, by their very nature, difficult to identify in advance, even though they make up a significant part of the housing numbers delivered in the Borough. Although Councils are now allowed to count a small 'windfall' allowance, this does not really reflect the amount of windfall housing that has come forward historically in the Borough.
19. Recent Government proposals to convert empty offices to housing will not help much as many are not suitable for new homes, and in town centres in particular the Council must balance the need for new homes with the need to provide local jobs. The use of vacant office buildings for new housing will result in the need for more sites for offices to be provided in the longer term which will also put pressure on the Green Belt. There is also no certainty about if, when and where such conversions might take place.

The Inspector's concerns

20. The Inspector held an Exploratory Meeting in August 2012 at which he identified a number of concerns. The Examination was suspended for six months to allow the Council time to carry out further work to address these.
21. In relation to one of his concerns, the Inspector required that the Core Strategy should expand on the reference to sustainable urban extensions by identifying 'broad areas of search', which are greenfield / Green Belt sites beyond existing towns and villages, to provide housing in the longer term and to show flexibility in the supply of sites. The Inspector is seeking certainty that the housing target can be delivered over the 15 year period of the plan's life. This ultimately means identifying sufficient sites to meet the target, with a small allowance for windfalls. It also means that the Council needs to demonstrate some flexibility in the event that some sites fail to come forward, and towards the end of the plan period when it becomes more difficult to identify specific sites.
22. The specific sites themselves will not be identified until the next more detailed part of the plan (the Development Management Policies DPD) is prepared. Before this stage is reached, more work will be done to look at local environmental constraints and future infrastructure requirements, and further consultation will be carried out.

'Broad areas of search' for sustainable urban extensions

23. Government guidance requires the Council to look at greenfield areas that are not in the Green Belt for sustainable urban extensions before looking at the Green Belt itself. The only countryside area in the Borough that is not in the Green Belt is the rural surrounds of Horley.
24. In response to the Inspector's concerns, the Council prepared a technical report to look at potential locations for areas of search for future housing sites, which concluded that the most suitable areas of search would be:
 - Small sites adjoining Horley, subject to flood and other constraints, for up to 200 homes.
 - Green Belt land to the East of Redhill and the East of Merstham (500-700 homes).
 - Green Belt land to the South and South West of Reigate, around Woodhatch (500-700 homes).
25. The exact scale and timing of new housing in these locations will depend on how many development opportunities first come forward in the Borough's towns and villages, largely as 'windfall' sites: it is anticipated that greenfield sites will only be needed in the longer term.
26. In December 2012 full Council agreed further amendments to address the Inspector's concerns, including the identification of the above 'broad areas of search' for future housing sites. These were published for public consultation between 14 December 2012 and 4 February 2013. Because the Core Strategy is already in examination, all the comments received on the further amendments will be sent straight to the Inspector for his consideration.

Responding to the petition

27. Since the Core Strategy is already in examination and the petition has been submitted in response to the further amendments to the Core Strategy, agreed by the Council and published in December to address the Inspector's concerns, it would be appropriate for Council to note the petition and to refer it to the Core Strategy Inspector to be taken into account as part of the examination. The Inspector is already aware of the existence of the petition and expects to receive it in due course.
28. The Council has consistently reaffirmed its intention to achieve an adopted Core Strategy as soon as possible. It is important that the Council continues to work towards achieving an adopted Core Strategy as soon as possible for a number of reasons:
- The Council will have control over where new housing and other development will go.
 - The Council will be able to develop more detailed policies, including those to protect the character of existing communities.
 - The Council will be able to put in place the Community Infrastructure Levy which will ensure that all eligible development contributes towards the cost of the infrastructure that is needed to support it – for example schools, roads, community facilities, parks and playgrounds.
29. To support the request of the petitioners, and for Council to now oppose any potential future development in the Green Belt, would undermine the existing Core Strategy which has been submitted and amended with the support of full Council, based on the detailed evidence prepared. Without an adopted Core Strategy, the Council would lose control over where development is located, which instead would be decided by Planning Inspectors on appeal. The consequence would be that there could be development anywhere in the Borough's Green Belt, and a lot sooner than would be the case if the Core Strategy were adopted.

RECEIVING AND RESPONDING TO THE PETITION

30. Under the Petition Scheme, a spokesperson for the petitioners may present the petition and speak at the Council meeting for up to 5 minutes. A representative of the Petitioners will be attending the meeting to address Council.
31. The petition scheme provides that Council will decide how to respond to the petition at this meeting.
32. The options for the Council in relation to the petition are:
1. Note the petition and refer it to the Core Strategy Planning Inspector to take into account as part of the Examination in Public on the submitted Core Strategy proposals (Recommended Option);
 2. Support the request of the petitioners;
 3. Reject the request of the petitioners; or

4. Refer the petition to the Executive for further consideration.
33. Option 1 is recommended for the reasons set out in paragraphs 27 and 28 above.
34. Option 2 is not recommended for the reasons set out in paragraph 29 above.
35. Option 3, to reject the request of the petitioners, is not recommended as it would not recognise the importance of the Core Strategy Inspector's consideration of the petition in relation to the question of identifying broad areas of search for greenfield / Green Belt sites, as a last resort when all other sources of supply have been exhausted, as part of the strategy for making provision for housing sites in the Borough.
36. Option 4, to refer the petition to the Executive for further consideration, is not recommended as the Examination in Public hearings are due to commence on 14 May 2013.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

37. There are no direct financial implications in respect of the recommendation for the petition to be noted and referred to the Core Strategy Inspector. The financial implications of taking a course of action that undermines the Core Strategy could be considerable, given the resources that have been put into developing the Core Strategy thus far.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

38. The statutory position is set out at paragraphs 1 and 2 of this report.

EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

39. There are no equality implications directly related to the petition.

Background Papers: Reigate and Banstead Petition Scheme
Petitions regarding Green Belt development

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