HEARING STATEMENT

Examination of the Suffolk Coastal District Local Plan

On behalf of:
RH & R Paul

In respect of:
Matter 2: The Suffolk Coastal Spatial Strategy
C Distribution of Growth and the Settlement Hierarchy

Date:
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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 This Hearing Statement has been prepared on behalf of our client RH & R Paul in respect of Matter 2 C Distribution of Growth and the Settlement Hierarchy of the Inspector’s Matters, Issues and Questions for the Examination of the Suffolk Coastal District Local Plan. It responds to the following questions raised by the Inspector:

2.18 Is the identification of settlements as set out in the Settlement Hierarchy in Policy SCLP3.2 justified?

2.19 Is the distribution of housing development as set out in table 3.5 justified and is it consistent with national policy for the achievement of sustainable development?

2.20 Would the Plan as drafted be sufficiently flexible to adapt to rapid change as set out in paragraph 11 of the Framework and would the definition of Settlement Boundaries through Policy SCLP3.3 be effective in meeting the objectively assessment needs for housing and other uses?

1.2 The Statement is intended to assist the Inspector’s consideration of the soundness of the Plan without repeating the representations already submitted on behalf of our client to the Local Plan Final Draft consultation (Comment ID: 1341). It will form the basis of our discussion points at the Examination Hearing session on 21st August 2019.

2. ISSUE – WHETHER THE PLAN SETS OUT A CLEAR SPATIAL STRATEGY FOR THE PATTERN OF DEVELOPMENT CONSISTENT WITH NATIONAL POLICY?

Question 2.18

Is the identification of settlements as set out in the Settlement Hierarchy in Policy SCLP3.2 justified?

2.1 NPPF paragraph 35 states that a plan is justified if it presents “an appropriate strategy, taking into account the reasonable alternatives, and based on proportionate evidence”. As set out in our previous representations, there are clear errors and inconsistencies in the assessment of settlements contained in the Council’s Topic Paper: Settlement Hierarchy (Examination Document Reference D34) which provides the evidence base for the settlement hierarchy in Policy SCLP3.2 and in particular there are errors with the assessment of Sutton. The evidence supporting this policy cannot therefore be
considered proportionate as different settlements are assessed differently due both to factual inaccuracies and inadequate assessment criteria.

2.2 We do not intend to repeat the detailed assessment set out in our previous representations here, but rather build on a few key points:

(i) The two versions of Suffolk Coastal District Council’s (SCDC’s) Topic Paper: Settlement Hierarchy from July 2018 (Examination Document Reference D35) and January 2019 (Examination Document Reference D34) follow the exact same methodology but present a different conclusion with respect to Sutton’s place in the hierarchy. In July 2018 Sutton scored 10 points which meant it was identified as a ‘Small Village’, but in January 2019 this score was reduced to 9 points which demoted Sutton to being in the ‘Countryside’. The reason for this difference in score is that in July 2018 Sutton was considered to be within 1-5km of a Major Centre or Town (i.e. Woodbridge), but in January 2019 it was reassessed as being more than 5km away;

(ii) A comparatively large number of objections were received to the identification of Sutton as a small village in the First Draft Local Plan (despite the fact that it is identified as a village and not as in the countryside in the adopted Core Strategy). A significant number of these objections concerned an error in the quoted population of Sutton in the Council’s assessment. This error had no effect on the identification of Sutton as a small village as settlement population was not part of the assessment), but despite this it clearly led to an unnecessarily large level of public objection which in turn has influenced the objectivity of SCDC’s decision making;

(iii) The Council’s lack of objectivity in assessing the correct position of Sutton in the settlement hierarchy is clearly demonstrated by the assessment of Sutton’s proximity to its closest town of Woodbridge. No explanation has been provided as to why Sutton is no longer considered to be within 5km of Woodbridge and it is clear from Figures 1 and 2 below that the village is as close or closer to a Market Town (defined as either Leiston, Saxmundham, Framlingham, Aldeburgh or Woodbridge – incl. the adjoining urban parts of Melton & Martlesham) compared to other settlements that have been judged to be within 5km;

(iv) Figure 1 is an updated version of the map provided in our previous representations. It compares the location of Sutton with that of Burgh and Debach which are both assessed as being within 5km of Woodbridge and Dallinghoo which was assessed as being within 5km in July 2018, but demoted to being greater than 5km in January 2019 (Similarly to Sutton this resulted in it being demoted to being within the countryside). The map clearly shows that all four settlements would be further than 5km away from the centre of Woodbridge in terms of the shortest driving route, that both Burgh and Sutton are within 5km of the edge of the Woodbridge urban area by the
shortest driving route and within 5km as the crow flies from the centre of Woodbridge, but that Debach and Dallinghoo are greater than 5km away by both of these measurements. This demonstrates a worrying lack of consistency in the assessment against this criteria. Burgh and Sutton are clearly within 5km of Woodbridge by any reasonable assessment and should therefore both be assessed as such, while Debach and Dallinghoo are both slightly more than 5km away and if one is assessed as being within 5km then they both should be; and

Figure 1. Distance to Woodbridge (incl. urban parts of Melton and Martlesham) from Burgh, Dallinghoo, Debach and Sutton

(v) Figure 2 further demonstrates the lack of consistency regarding how the distance between settlements has been measured. It has been updated following our previous representations and now shows the locations of Brandeston and Earl Soham which are both assessed as not being within 5km of Framlingham, in addition to Easton, Letheringham and Great Glemham which are all assessed as being within 1km-5km of either Framlingham or Saxmundham. The map shows that all three of the settlements that are assessed as being within 5km of a Market Town would be further than 5km away from the centre of both Towns by the shortest driving route, that only
Easton is within both 5km of the edge of a Town (Framlingham) by the shortest driving route and as the crow flies and that while Great Glemham is within 5km of the centre of Saxmundham as the crow flies, the shortest driving route to the edge of the town is 7.4km. Furthermore, Letheringham is greater than 5km away from Framlingham by all measures. In contrast, both Brandeston and Earl Soham are within 5km of the centre of Framlingham as the crow flies and Earl Soham is also within 5km from the edge of Framlingham by the shortest driving route, but despite this both settlements are judged to be greater than 5km away.

Figure 2. Distance to Market Towns from Brandeston, Earl Soham, Easton, Letheringham and Great Glemham

2.3 The maps at Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate the lack of clear assessment criteria for judging the distance between a settlement and its nearest town. This is of critical importance as without such criteria it is clear that there are significant inconsistencies in the assessment and in the case of Sutton that a subjective decision has been made to alter the assessment in light of public objections. The assessment of Sutton in this regard is reminiscent of a case concerning Haddenham Neighbourhood Plan (‘R (on the application of Lightwood Strategic Limited) v. Aylesbury Vale District Council’, 2016). In this case, Lightwood Strategic instigated a legal challenge to the made Haddenham Neighbourhood Plan on the basis that there were serious errors in the scoring system used to allocate areas for development. The case was due to be heard at the High Court in March 2016, but following Haddenham Parish Council’s acceptance that it submitted erroneous sustainability scores, Aylesbury Vale District Council withdrew from the legal challenge and the housing policies in the Haddenham Neighbourhood Plan were quashed. This case demonstrates the importance of correct evidence and objective assessment in assessing the sustainability of different locations for development and clearly points to a need for the Council to revisit their assessment with respect to Sutton which should be given another point and promoted back to its true position in the hierarchy as a ‘Small Village’.
Question 2.19
Is the distribution of housing development as set out in table 3.5 justified and is it consistent with national policy for the achievement of sustainable development?

2.4 RH and R Paul are concerned that the housing distribution set out in Table 3.5 is not consistent with national policy for the promotion of sustainable development in rural areas. NPPF paragraph 78 states that "To promote sustainable development in rural areas, housing should be located where it will enhance or maintain the vitality of rural communities. Planning policies should identify opportunities for villages to grow and thrive, especially where this will support local services." The need for sustainable development in rural areas in the former Suffolk Coastal District area is confirmed at paragraph 3.3 of the Topic Paper: Site Selection (Examination Document Reference D34) which highlights the fact that:

"A significant number of consultation responses highlighted the need to direct more growth to the rural areas. Communities highlighted that the current strategy is restricting growth in rural areas which is becoming detrimental to the communities – seen through the increased closure of local services and facilities. Encouraging appropriate growth in rural areas is seen as a way of helping to retain the viability of these local services and facilities and where suitable, sites should be identified and brought forward."

2.5 Further confirmation of this need is provided at Paragraph 5.13 of the Final Draft Plan which states that:

"Small Villages are identified due to their modest range of service provision, which will serve the needs of residents within the village. They can also serve the needs of those living in other settlements or the countryside nearby although will generally cater for a smaller catchment than the Large Villages. As with the Large Villages, development of new housing in such settlements can help to support existing local services as well as contributing towards the mix of housing available in these villages."

2.6 These two quotes clearly demonstrate the importance of allowing suitable levels of growth in rural areas of the District to support sustainability. This importance is also translated into the Local Plan’s stated strategy for rural area’s at Policy SCLP12.34, that seeks to deliver new homes which contribute to providing a mix of housing choice in rural areas and help to sustain rural communities.

2.7 Despite the clear importance of delivering new homes in rural areas to promote sustainability, the distribution of development set out at Table 3.5 fails to allocate any dwellings to 45% (23 out of 51) of the district’s small villages and 24% (12 out of 51) of these villages are set to grow by fewer than 5 dwellings during the plan period when committed developments are also taken into account. This approach clearly neglects the needs of these settlements for sustainable levels of growth and when
coupled with the restrictions imposed by Policy SCLP3.3 Settlement Boundaries (discussed below) would severely restrict opportunities for any additional development during the plan period. This approach is not therefore in accordance with national policy for the promotion of sustainable development in rural areas, nor is it an appropriate and therefore justified approach.

**Question 2.20**

**Would the Plan as drafted be sufficiently flexible to adapt to rapid change as set out in paragraph 11 of the Framework and would the definition of Settlement Boundaries through Policy SCLP3.3 be effective in meeting the objectively assessment needs for housing and other uses?**

2.8 As set out above, there is a distinct need for sustainable levels of growth in rural areas of the District. To effectively respond to this need, RH & R Paul consider that both allocations and a flexible approach to small/medium scale residential development in small villages will be required.

2.9 At present, Policy SCLP3.3 allows for development within settlement boundaries, but strictly controls any development outside of these boundaries. In addition, Policy SCLP5.2 states that residential development in small villages will be permitted within defined Settlement Boundaries where it is: a) A small group of dwellings of a scale appropriate to the size, location and character of the village; or b) Infill development. It is clear from even a brief look at the Policies Maps for the small villages, however, that the Settlement Boundaries have been drawn so tightly as to render all but the smallest levels of infill development completely impossible. This approach clearly neglects the needs of these settlements for sustainable levels of growth and when coupled with the failure of the Local Plan to allocate any residential development to 45% of the small villages (discussed above) would severely restrict opportunities for any additional development during the plan period to adapt to the changing needs of these settlements. To resolve this issue, RH & R Paul consider that Policies SCLP3.3 and SCLP5.2 should be amended to include criteria for allowing small/medium scale residential development (e.g. up to 10 dwellings) outside of the settlement boundaries of small villages. This would also bring the small villages in line with the flexible allowance for growth in housing clusters in the countryside set by Policy SCLP5.4 (please see our hearing statement for Matter 4 for further comment on this policy).