

'Bitter blow' for council's defence of the Green Belt

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The Royal Borough has been dealt a 'bitter blow' that threatens its strong cross-party defence of the Green Belt and its stance against unacceptably high levels of housing development.

The major setback comes in a report from the Planning Inspectorate rejecting six of the 26 policies in the draft core strategy of the Local Development Framework (LDF). All of the policies judged to be 'unsound' relate to how the council will fit future housing and employment opportunities into existing urban areas and all are based on exhaustive consultation with residents who have made it clear they do not want their Green Belt turned into development sites.

Cllr Derek Wilson, lead member for planning and housing, said: "The inspector has made it crystal clear that he is instructing the council to conduct a review of the Green Belt and telling us that we need to take another look at designating specific sites for development if we are to accommodate what the government believes we need for housing and employment in the years ahead. The inspector's view is that sticking to existing boundaries is not in the best interests of the local community. It's good to know that the inspector's view on local land allocation is more important than those of councillors who know the area and represent the expressed wishes of residents!

"This report is a bitter blow for the council and our community. The core strategy is the foundation of the new LDF, drafted in a way that reflects what local people have told us through the detailed consultation processes. Their message has come across loud and clear – that we must fit development into existing urban areas.

"Now we are effectively told by the planning inspector to ignore the consultation we have done with our local residents."

The report into the draft core strategy follows detailed scrutiny – including a public examination earlier this year – and the planning inspector's view is that the council's policies on housing and employment development:

- don't take opportunities for using the Green Belt into account
- depend too much on the uncertain supply of windfall sites (sites that become available unexpectedly)
- don't identify actual locations or areas for housing and employment growth and
- set too high thresholds for affordable housing.

Cllr Wilson said the report demonstrated the difficulties and frustrations of trying to produce the core strategy against a background of shifting government goalposts and uncertainties about the South East Plan.

He explained: "We have been constantly juggling with changes to government planning policy advice over the past few years, including changes to the amount of detail the core strategy should contain, particularly on the location of housing and a shift away from taking account of windfall sites. Little wonder the LDF process across England is in disarray!"

Cllr Wilson said that since 2004, when the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act came into force, there have been only 18 core strategy examinations out of almost 400 local planning authorities in England. While 13 were found to be sound, the majority will have to be reviewed in light of subsequent regional guidance, particularly in the South East where only three core strategies have been successfully completed. A further 10 strategies were directed to be withdrawn by the Secretary of State before reaching examination and numerous local authorities are delaying their LDFs because of the uncertainties in the process.

Despite the fact that 20 of the 26 policies in the Royal Borough's core strategy are judged to be 'sound', the entire document now has to be withdrawn so that more work and further community consultation can be carried out. There will also need to be another public inquiry, all adding to further delay and additional costs.

Cllr Wilson paid tribute to the council officers involved in the preparation of the strategy and added: "The inspector's verdict is no reflection on their professionalism and hard work, but rather a judgement on the government's inconsistency. The fact that 20 of the policies were found to be sound demonstrates that the majority of the LDF is on course and we believe that much of background work and evidence will count next time."

The council had until September 21 to check the facts in the inspector's report. Any points arising from this check will be sent to the Planning Inspectorate, after which the final report will be issued by the inspectorate and the council will make it available to the public in due course.