

# Elmbridge Local Plan Examination

## Matter 5: Housing Delivery

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## Issue 8 – Whether the approach towards the delivery of housing land is justified, effective, consistent with national policy and positively prepared.

### 4.2 The spatial strategy focus is on brownfield sites, with a significant component of the supply coming forward on small sites. In accordance with paragraph 60 of the Framework, in what way would this approach ensure that there is a sufficient variety of land to come forward?

1. As set out in our Matter 3 Statement, the submitted Plan does not ensure that a sufficient variety of land will come forward for development. This is contrary to the requirements of paragraph 60 of the Framework that requires this, in order to support the Government’s objective of significantly boosting the supply of homes.
2. In terms of housing mix, paragraph 6.18 of the submitted Plan states that the Local Housing Needs Assessment (2020) identified that it was important that new housing development focussed on providing smaller homes. It notes an indicative need as follows:
  - 1 bed – 20%
  - 2 bed – 50%
  - 3 bed – 30%
  - 4+ bed – 10%
3. Some smaller 1 and 2 bed units can in theory be delivered through higher-density flatted developments in urban areas (subject to scale and viability). However, the SA at paragraph 3.27 sets out that the evidence base (comprising the Urban Capacity Study 2018, and the Land Availability Assessments (2018, 2021 and 2022) concludes that there are very few, if any, large sites in the urban area that can accommodate the mix of homes needed, and particularly specialist accommodation. As such, it was considered necessary at that time to assess Green Belt land around existing settlements. This situation has not changed. However, the Council’s position has.
4. High density developments on urban sites will only deliver smaller homes / flats, in order to respond to site context, parking requirements and viability. These types of homes are frequently unsuitable for family housing.
5. The Council’s SA is clear that Green Belt release is necessary in order to meet need and to accommodate the mix of homes that are needed. Specifically, paragraph 3.96 of the SA states that:

*“Due to the small-scale nature of urban sites in the borough, a mix of housing types is difficult to achieve and competition for housing may impact economic land uses.”*
6. Contrary to the provisions of paragraph 60 of the Framework, and the conclusions of its own evidence base, the submitted Plan fails to meet the overall need for housing / affordable housing, and fails also to deliver the mix of housing that is needed in Elmbridge, and it is unsound.

**4.5 HOU002 states that the five year housing supply position is 4.36 years. How does this accord with paragraph 74 of the Framework which requires Local Planning authorities to identify and maintain a supply of specific deliverable sites sufficient to provide a minimum of five years worth of housing against their housing requirements? Is the Plan positively prepared in this regard?**

7. Paragraph 74 of the Framework (2021) requires that Local Planning Authorities identify and update annually a supply of specific deliverable sites sufficient to provide a minimum of five years' worth of housing against their housing requirement set out in adopted strategic policies.
8. The Planning Practice Guidance ("PPG") confirms that the assessment of land availability to identify a future supply of land, which is suitable, available and achievable for housing and economic development uses over the plan period, is important to inform plan-making (ID: 3-001).
9. Paragraph 4.22 of the Council's Land Availability Assessment 2022 (HOU002) confirms that the Local Plan will, at best on the Council's case, deliver 3,389 homes in the first five years of the plan period, with a five-year housing supply position of 4.36 years.
10. A Plan that cannot demonstrate a 5 year supply at examination / adoption is contrary to the relevant provisions of national policy and out of date (under the terms of paragraph 11 of the Framework) at the point of adoption - a position which will clearly deteriorate further in the circumstances applicable to Elmbridge. It is unsound on this basis alone, with a need for additional allocations to deliver in the shorter term.
11. The Plan is not positively prepared, effective or consistent with national policy and is therefore in conflict with paragraph 35 of the Framework.

## The Green Belt

**There is a significant amount of evidence concerning the existing Green Belt and how this land performs against green belt purposes including a Green Belt boundary review. An assessment has been made as to the potential contribution the release of some areas of green belt could have towards meeting housing need over the Plan period. The Council do not agree that there are exceptional circumstances which would warrant the release of any green belt land. The Council also disagree with the assessment made in relation to a number of areas which ARUP have identified as weakly performing areas of the Green Belt.**

12. The conclusion of the Council, ultimately, that exceptional circumstances do not exist in Elmbridge to justify Green Belt release is contrary to and inconsistent with the evidence base for the Local Plan, and contrary also to the judgment of the professional Officers of the Council (see paragraphs 10 – 15 of our representations to Policy SS3).
13. Paragraph 6.218 of the Spatial Strategy Topic Paper (TOP001) identifies that the Council ultimately concluded that exceptional circumstances do not exist in Elmbridge because:
  - the acuteness / intensity of the objectively assessed need within Elmbridge is not dissimilar to neighbouring authorities and those in the wider South-East;
  - the constraints on supply / availability of land does not place pressure on providing unsuitable development elsewhere;
  - sustainable development can be achieved through the pursuit of a brownfield only approach, which does not affect the Green Belt;

- the nature and extent of the harm to the Green Belt are significant; and
  - the impacts on the Green Belt cannot be ameliorated or reduced.
14. These conclusions are wholly unreasonable and conflict with the Council's own evidence base (including a Green Belt assessment carried out independently by Arup on behalf of the Council).
  15. We have addressed elsewhere in this Statement why it is clear to anyone, acting reasonably, that exceptional circumstances do exist strategically in the borough to warrant Green Belt release as a matter of principle, and for specific sites identified in Arup's technical work.
  16. By way of example, the Green Belt Boundary Review and the Council's Supplementary Work (Methodology and Assessment) 2018 concluded that the land promoted by Kingacre Estates on the Former Corby Works site on Seven Hills Road (Ref. RSA-12 (Sub-Area 21) performed only moderately against Green Belt purposes, has strong urban influences to all sides and at a strategic level, the Sub-Area within which it is located performs weakly against Purpose 2, and its release is unlikely to harm the integrity of the wider strategic Green Belt accordingly. The Land Availability Assessment (2018) also shows that the Former Corby Works site is suitable, available and achievable for development. As a consequence, the site was identified by the Council as a 'Potential Development Area to be Masterplanned' within the Local Plan Options Consultation 2019 document as part of Option 3 (to optimise the urban area and large Green Belt release).
  17. As set out in our submitted representations to Policy SS3 (paragraph 35), the Council's 'Exceptional Circumstances' report produced in 2016 identified a number of factors (including market and affordable housing need, affordability issues, the lack of sufficient available sites within urban areas, starter homes, and imbalance in housing mix) that led it to conclude that 'exceptional circumstances' did exist to justify amendments to the Green Belt boundary. The factors that led to this conclusion have not changed and in fact, the need for housing, especially affordable housing, has in fact increased since 2016. As such it is clear, with reference to the Council's own evidence base, that exceptional circumstances exist to warrant the release of appropriate land from the Green Belt in accordance with national policy.

#### **4.14 What is the relevance of the fact that the current housing need is significantly higher than the existing target set within the Core Strategy (Paragraph 6.24 of TP001)?**

18. There is no relevance to the Council's reference in TP001 that the annual local housing need figure of 647 dwellings per annum calculated using the standard method, is significantly higher than the existing target within the Core Strategy (225 dwellings).
19. The Core Strategy was adopted as long ago as 2011, with a target well below actual needs as they were identified then. It is wholly common for a Plan being examined in 2024 to have a housing requirement figure that is material higher than a Plan adopted more than 10 years ago. Indeed, it is to be expected where there is a recognised national housing crisis due to a lack of supply, and given the government's objective to boost significantly the supply of housing.
20. Indeed, given the chronic and worsening affordability issues in Elmbridge specifically, there is a very strong case for the housing requirement to be increased to a level above the standard method figure (noting also that the standard method figure for Elmbridge is capped at a level well below the level of need).

**4.15 The Council have stated that the need in Elmbridge is no more acute/intense than in neighbouring boroughs. However, a majority of neighbouring boroughs (Guildford, Waverley, Runnymede, Spelthorne) have progressed a strategy with an element of Green Belt release and/or are able to meet their housing need in full. If the Council consider the need to be no more acute than these neighbouring boroughs, what is the rationale for Elmbridge not following this approach?**

21. There is no rationale for Elmbridge adopting a different approach to neighbouring boroughs.
22. Neighbouring authorities including Guildford, Mole Valley, Runnymede and Spelthorne, have all progressed Local Plans that include releases of land from the Green Belt, in an attempt to meet some / all of their identified local housing need.
23. Guildford Borough, by way of comparison, has 89% of its land within the Green Belt, whilst in Mole Valley it is 76% (with 35% of the land also being constrained by the Surrey Hills National Landscape designation). These neighbouring authorities are both much more significantly constrained by Green Belt than Elmbridge, yet both have made / are making significant releases of land from the Green Belt given the need for housing and affordable housing.
24. As set out in our submitted representations to Policy SS3, the Local Plan Inspector who dealt with the examination of the now adopted Guildford Local Plan, concluded that the pressing need for housing, the shortage of affordable housing and the *severe and deteriorating* affordability situation (it should be noted that Elmbridge has even worse affordability issues than Guildford), a lack of sufficient urban capacity, and the fact that there was no scope to export housing need to another district unmet needs, meant that:
 

*“In conclusion, all the above points amount to strategic-level exceptional circumstances to alter the Green Belt boundary to meet development needs in the interests of the proper long-term planning of the Borough.”*  
(paragraph 89).
25. All of these issues, and the conclusions reached by that Inspector, apply equally (if not more so) in Elmbridge.
26. With a particular focus on relative affordability levels, the table below shows that Elmbridge has the worst affordability ratios (indeed one of the highest in England), the third highest needs for housing per annum and the second highest number of households on the housing waiting list across all of the Surrey authorities:

Borough	Affordability Ratio (2022)	Housing Need - Standard Method Figure (2023)	Numbers of households on the authorities' housing waiting list
<b>Elmbridge</b>	<b>20.0</b>	<b>650</b>	<b>2,306</b>
Epsom and Ewell	20.0	573	1,340
Guildford	12.7	779	1,910
Mole Valley	13.8	459	664
Reigate and Banstead	14.4	644	1,224

Runnymede	12.0	587	1,207
Spelthorne	11.3	625	3,798
Surrey Heath	11.6	321	365
Tandridge	15.0	639	1,910
Waverley	17.4	712	796

**4.16 In general terms, the Framework seeks to support the Governments objective of significantly boosting the supply of homes. Paragraph 35 states that Plans should provide a strategy which, as a minimum, seeks to meet the area’s objectively assessed needs. Paragraph 11 of the Framework sets out the approach to Plan making. In what way does the Green Belt in Elmbridge provide a strong reason for restricting the overall scale, type or distribution of development?**

27. The Green Belt in Elmbridge does not provide a strong reason for restricting the scale, type or distribution of development.
28. Paragraph 140 of the Framework allows for Green Belt boundaries to be altered where exceptional circumstances exist i.e. it is not an absolute constraint.
29. As identified above, the need or housing / affordable housing is greater in Elmbridge, and the extent of Green Belt less, than in neighbouring authorities such as Guildford where Inspectors have, wholly understandably, concluded that the need for housing/ affordable housing, the constraints in the plan area, the inability to export needs elsewhere and the inability to accommodate needs fully in the urban area, create the exceptional circumstances necessary to justify / require amendments to Green Belt boundaries.
30. At a more local level, the Council’s own evidence base, prepared independently by ARUP, demonstrates that there are areas of land within the Green Belt which do not perform strongly against its purposes, and where Green Belt boundaries could be altered without significant harm to the function / purposes of the Green Belt.
31. In Elmbridge’s case, the professional Officers of the Council of course concluded similarly but this position was ultimately rejected by Members who have sought to treat the Green Belt as an absolute constraint, at the expense of those in desperate need for homes / affordable homes in the area.

**4.17 CD034a which was updated in November 2023 states that the Council consider the release of land from the Green Belt for housing purposes would negatively affect the boroughs existing settlement pattern and thus cause harm to the character of Elmbridge’s existing communities. Where in the evidence base is this assessment undertaken which explains how this conclusion has been reached?**

32. We are not clear where in the Council’s evidence base any technical assessment to this effect can be found.
33. All we are aware of is the statement made by the Council at paragraph 6.182 of the Spatial Strategy Topic Paper (TOP001) which simply states that:

*“It is the Council’s position that the release of land from the Green Belt would negatively affect the borough’s existing settlement pattern”.*

34. As well as being wholly unsubstantiated, we would suggest that it is the strategy in the submitted Plan that has the greatest risk of negatively affecting the existing settlements in Elmbridge, with a focus on maximising density in urban areas that is more likely to damage the character of the borough’s town, district and local centres.
35. The view of the professional Officers of the Council was that Green Belt release is necessary / appropriate in the circumstances of Elmbridge and having regard to the requirements of national planning policy.

**4.18 Paragraph 145 of the Framework advises, amongst other things, that local Planning authorities should Plan positively to enhance Green Belt use. Such as looking for opportunities to provide access, to provide opportunities for outdoor sport and recreation, to retain and enhance landscapes, visual amenity and biodiversity or to improve damaged and derelict land. In what way does the Plan address this?**

36. The submitted Local Plan effectively treats Green Belt as an absolute constraint. The Council has never sought to consider positive opportunities release of such land might unlock such as enhanced public access, or improvements to damaged and derelict previously developed land, contrary to the provisions of paragraph 145 of the Framework.
37. For example, Kingacre’s site at the Former Corby Works, Seven Hills Road has no current public access, and contains large areas of existing hardstanding and indeed a two-storey building and other derelict structures i.e. previously developed and derelict / damaged land. It provides the opportunity to deliver new homes / affordable homes together with other benefits.

**4.19 With reference to paragraph 143 (e) of the Framework, are the Council able to demonstrate that Green Belt boundaries will not need to be altered at the end of the Plan period?**

38. No.
39. It is evident, to both the professional Officers of the Council and the majority of those engaged in the examination process, that exceptional circumstances exist now to alter Green Belt boundaries. However, the Council has determined not to do so, despite the available evidence and the obvious social and economic implications.
40. By looking so negatively at the matter of housing delivery / Green Belt release, with a sole focus on avoiding such release irrespective of the consequences, the Council has ignored the needs that exist currently. It has given no thought whatsoever to longer-term matters such as whether Green Belt boundaries might need to be altered at the end of the Plan period.

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